PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST AS AN OLD WOMAN: TILLIE OLSEN'S METAPHOR IN *TELL ME A RIDDLE* AS UNDERSTOOD THROUGH PAUL RICOEUR'S *INTERPRETATION THEORY: DISCOURSE AND THE SURPLUS OF MEANING*

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in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the Degree of
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY
December, 1990

Thesis
1990D
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December, 1990

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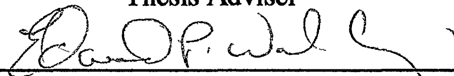

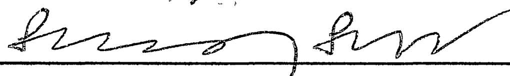

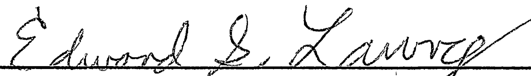

Dean of the Graduate College

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I want to express my gratitude

to Tillie Lerner Olsen in whose world hope has two lovely daughters,
anger and courage (St. Augustine);

to Peter Rollins, my dissertation adviser, who practices the most effective
form of critique--encouragement;

to my dissertation committee, Edward Walkiewicz, Jeffrey Walker, Leonard Leff, and
Edward Lawry, for the encouragement of careful critiquing;

to Suzanne Spears for preparing the final manuscript, and to Charly Fries for seeing it
to its destination;

to my family, Stuart, Calvin, David, and Catherine, who supported what my parents
had begun with their love of the written word--my hope to
someday come to the writing, faithful to both love and anger;

and to Paul Ricoeur for showing me how it is that metaphor offers a new way
to be in the world.

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INTRODUCTION

From "the stubborn, gnarled roots of the quarrel . . . swelled up visible, [that] split the earth"--opening phrases of the title story in her collection, *Tell Me a Riddle*--to "the flutes so joyous and vibrant [that] tremble in the air" on its last page, Tillie Olsen chronicles a fiery journey toward an ocean. The routing of this elemental story is not only the transcontinental travel of a dying woman and her spouse, but the course of aging, of self-discovery and a family history, of a revolution and migration to a new country, and of a search for "a reconciled peace" (77). Nor is the account of the old woman's sojourn--metaphor for the author's artistic commitment--primarily a biography, but a recounting of the effort to "total it all" (20), recognized in Olsen's first story, "I Stand Here Ironing." In a series of turns, the author uses repetition and refrain, catalogue and ellipsis, contrast and contradiction, in her determination to leave nothing out, to honor with Joycean persistence the whole of experience, before acknowledging the wonder at its center which remains for her also a struggle "to understand." Thus, the "reconciled peace" which her central character "had won to" early in the story, and away from which her subsequent journeys wrench her, continually eludes her until she confronts again the chief antagonists of her life--political oppression, economic and cultural deprivation and prejudice, personal isolation and betrayal (77). And the form of encounter in this title story reflects the challenge in all Olsen's writing to acknowledge intransigent injustice and lack of human fulfillment at all levels of life. If Tillie Olsen employs repetitive refrains and elliptical catalogues, her contrasts and contradictions echo the frustrated cry for liberation that it is her artistic commitment to make audible.

On the morning of May 19, 1989, I telephoned Tillie Olsen in her Laguna Street apartment in San Francisco. We had arranged this interview the evening before at a reading she had given to benefit Survivors International (established in 1985 by the medical section of Amnesty International and the Center for Investigation and Prevention of Torture) and *Poetry Flash* (a Bay Area publication featuring the works of young writers). The beneficiaries of her

appearance at the Berkeley Art Center that night were another sign of her life-long commitments to social justice and to the encouragement of unrecognized artists to "come to the writing." As she began, however, she revealed that her husband of nearly fifty years had died six weeks earlier and that this might well be her last public appearance.

Answering the telephone the following morning, she immediately apologized for having to ask me to call back in half an hour, explaining that the Chinese consulate was located across the street from her apartment, and she must go down to support the Chinese students who, at such great personal risk, were demonstrating against their government's oppression of fellow students in Beijing. I agreed to call later but, when I did so, heard only her voice on tape inviting me to leave a message. This response was repeated with subsequent calls until an hour had passed when I finally reached her, again apologetic, this time for having to answer her doorbell. I stayed on the line during the conversation that ensued between her and a young Chinese man from the crowd at the consulate below, come to pick up his wife and child to whom Tillie Olsen had offered food and a place to rest. In the process of their farewells she expressed support for their efforts, reviewing with them the recent history of China as a period of rapid change unprecedented in the world and insisting that China's aging leaders must give way to the new opportunities ahead. "You have to go to the next stage. It takes that spark. We have to go ahead; we have to change. It isn't good enough yet. Human rights without means . . . rights to a good education, a decent standard of living."

She went on to acknowledge that her own country has a long way to go as well, asserting that its direction the last twenty years has been backwards. Though more fortunate than China, with her combined struggle against the warlords' feudalism and the Japanese occupation, still the U.S. has cities like San Francisco in which one out of five children is hungry, costly prison systems a fraction of whose budgets would teach basic skills to the marginal and unemployed, and weapons stockpiles 5% of which are sufficient to blow up the world. Then she said goodbye to her guests, affirming, "I believe in one human race; we are all about the same things: to live decently, to seek the best for our children." And I heard her approach the phone, exclaim "O dear!" and put down the receiver.

When I finally got through to her, our conversation continued the same themes and tone. In answer to questions about literary strategies and images, she consistently redirected my focus to issues of human rights and the potential of the human spirit to learn and grow if freed from the barriers of ignorance and deprivation. The analysis that follows, therefore, is an attempt to respect Tillie Olsen's life-time commitment and service on behalf of human dignity and, at the same time, to highlight its congruity with her artistic means. As Olsen herself pointed out in her conversation that morning in May, declarations of human rights without the means to carry them out are a travesty. As a writer she has found, I believe, an artistic form peculiarly appropriate to expose idolatries within the state, the practice of religion, and even motherhood, when they fail to serve the common good.[1] James Joyce's shibboleths appear again here in an account that, like his, first honors the human capacity for contrasting and contradictory experiences, and for creative reflections upon them, before rejecting simplified or closed systems of evaluation that limit human potential through their too facile claims to understanding.

I begin with the title story, "Tell Me a Riddle," because I believe it is the key to Olsen's artistic expression for which her other works are preparatory and complementary. Reading the structure of that work as concentric, I will examine the rhetorical strategies I find most expressive in her prose--repetition and refrain, catalogue and ellipsis, contrast and contradiction--and will use Paul Ricoeur's *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* to identify the relationship of the story's metaphors and symbols to its theme. Finally, I will relate the rest of the collection, and Olsen's other writings, to the thematic analysis. Having also reviewed Olsen criticism, and utilizing her method as I read it, I will end where I began, with the title story, and the phrase with which she expresses the old woman's original desire--"a reconciled solitude" (95). The response the story offers to that basic longing for peace--for home--is a telling riddle by a story-teller equal, I believe, to the most perplexing of riddles.

[Tillie Olsen's creative and expressive use of grammatical conventions--paragraphing, italics, quotation marks, ellipsis--combined with my own inclusion of ellipsis in quoting her work, may well confuse the observant reader. Reference to Olsen's original text is the only available test for verifying poetic license.]

CHAPTER I

METHOD AND ORGANIZATION

Two thematic variations emerge from Tillie Olsen's poetry and fiction, and both are subjects of analysis in her non-fiction statements about artistic commitment. The first combines insistence upon inclusiveness in art, as in life--that literature depict both the ordinary, every-day circumstance that supports and thwarts common existence and the economic, political, and cosmic forces that form such circumstance--with an appeal for freedom to express the creative potential in human beings upon which both personal and social growth and reclamation beyond such limitation depend. In the second variation, Olsen enacts these themes as, what she terms, a "destroyed person" for whom writing has been "the air I breathed," but in whom the circumstances of ethnic origin, gender, and class have been sources not only of deepening, but also of destructive discouragement. To maintain hope in the struggle with such lessening and thwarting meant for Olsen a continual effort to salvage and reassemble her work as well as her life in order to recover what had been lost. The mythos she creates and the writer she becomes interact to overcome these balks and threats in her experience, so that both her human development and her artistic realization can, in turn, serve her chosen purpose: to discover and then promote, in others as in herself, lost or neglected literary work, and to encourage potential artists to "come to the writing." A brief survey of her convoluted literary biography confirms these themes.

After the early publication of four pieces of protest literature in 1934--two poems and two political exposés that appeared in the *Partisan*, *Partisan Review*, and *New Republic*--Tillie Lerner, twenty-year-old writer and union organizer, was lost to the largely socialist literary community which had first recognized and promoted her work. She was the child of Jewish immigrant parents, emigrés from the Russian revolution of 1905 and long-alienated from their religious roots. Once settled in the central plains of this country, in Omaha, they became active

in the Socialist Party of Nebraska.[2] It was there, during her high school years, that she joined the Young Communist League and was trained in unionizing techniques aimed at the local meat-packing industry. Moving to California in the early '30's, she pursued her major commitment--to work at labor-organizing--this time in agricultural and maritime industries on the West Coast, and her early protest literature was the product of that experience. Although organizing took precedence, she continued as well cultivating her skill in fiction-writing with work on a novel. Begun in 1932 during a convalescence in her parental home, *Yonnondio* was conceived initially as a vehicle for labor-organizing. Though it was subsequently set aside, and then lost, one chapter did appear in a 1934 *Partisan Review*, and major publishers responded by offering to subsidize the work as it progressed. All five of these earliest publications, while serving as political and economic polemic, also engaged the literary techniques that were to form Olsen's unique style.

Having disappeared soon thereafter as a publishing writer, Tillie Lerner eventually married a union printer and focused her creative energies on raising four children. Mother of a working-class San Francisco family, she was herself employed as a wage-earner, but continued to exercise both her political commitment and her literary craft in the brief time available between family and work.[3] Not until her youngest child entered school, however, was this high-school dropout able to enroll in the writing course which was to reestablish her role as "a writing writer." For she was recommended for the Stegner creative-writing program at Stanford University and was subsequently awarded an eight-month fellowship for fiction-writing that produced, in 1956-57, three short stories, published in regional journals: "Help Her to Believe," "Hey Sailor, What Ship," and "Baptism." A two-year return to wage-earning ended with receipt of another grant, this time from the Ford Foundation, that allowed her to revise the original three works and publish a fourth, later the title story of her 1961 collection, *Tell Me a Riddle*. It was with this thin volume, the result of two windfall awards, that Olsen regained recognition after over twenty years of literary silence--as a major talent. Her political commitment had shifted, meanwhile, as had her party affiliation; and a theme begun in the 1930's novel became the focus of her 1950's short fiction: the effect of inhumane cultural systems and values upon the family with its commitment to supportive nurture and critical confrontation.

Following the success of *Tell Me a Riddle*, Tillie Olsen received further support for her craft from a series of grants, fellowships, and visiting lectureships with such institutions as the National Endowment for the Arts, the Guggenheim Foundation, the Universities of Massachusetts and California, and with M.I.T., Radcliffe, Amherst, and Stanford. Her works during the later period of her career centered at first on non-fiction, including two presentations to academic societies (published in 1965 and 1972) which were collected in 1978, along with "Biographical Interpretation" (on Rebecca Harding Davis) under the title *Silences*. The focus of all these works is the issue of thwarted and unrecognized expression--as discussed by both well-known and undiscovered writers--among victims of discrimination, especially the poor and women. During this period, the manuscript of her lost novel also surfaced again; and, in 1974, during a residency at a McDowell County writers' workshop, she finally reassembled and published *Yonnondio* as an unfinished work, *From the Thirties*. Preceding these two major publications, another piece of short fiction, "Requa," appeared in a 1970 *Iowa Review*, with the promise of a later installment. Recognized, as "Help Her to Believe" had been, in *Best American Short Stories*, this "finished but incomplete work" has become "Requa I," and lacks a sequel.

In 1983, Tillie Olsen wrote a foreword to Claudia Tate's collected essays, *Black Women Writers at Work*; and in 1984, her own edition of collected works appeared under the title *Mother to Daughter/Daughter to Mother/Mothers on Mothering: A Day Book*, "selected and shaped by Tillie Olsen." Both *Silences* and the *Day Book* represent more than fifty years of assembling the comment of both recognized and little-known writers on the cost of discounted talent; in this struggle to express the plight of undervalued artists, she believes, lies a clue to the renewal of their own lives and of the lives of those in the world beyond their own.

The breadth of Olsen's themes, reflected across the near-century of her literary biography, challenges the student of her work: by what method should such an inclusive and varied literary talent be evaluated and critiqued? Certainly data are here for sociological assessment of the environmental and cultural values that influenced her writing, including a Marxist reading of her background, motivation, and impact; or for a psychoanalytic study, especially of her later writing, with emphasis on a feminist critique. Historical criticism could add significantly to an understanding of her relation with and reaction to the heritage in Eastern

European Judaism that she has consciously rejected; and genre studies, including classical concern with the character of mimesis, could prove productive with this author who employs traditional forms, but with significant difference. In a later chapter, I propose a number of these alternatives more concretely, after excursions already begun in those directions.

The history of my absorption and struggle with Tillie Olsen's writing included, then, becoming aware of a variety of theories that could be useful in interpreting her work. As I continued reading and rereading her texts, most persistently the collection, *Tell Me a Riddle*, and relatively late in my search, I came upon four lectures which Paul Ricoeur delivered in 1973 as part of the centennial celebration at Texas Christian University. Originally entitled *Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning*, the series was later expanded and published in a deceptively brief volume that integrated a number of interpretation theories I had come to respect. His combination of these resources within a comprehensive analysis of the nature of discourse led me to more reading and rereading, both of Ricoeur and Olsen, until I became convinced that together they offered parallel answers to questions about how to understand a text that I had posed for myself years earlier.

Therefore, I have chosen to use as my primary critical reference Paul Ricoeur's 1976 publication, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning*, because of its creative use of theories congruent with Olsen's major literary work, "Tell Me a Riddle." I find this story central, not only for its placement midway within her opus, but also for its comment upon it; and Ricoeur employs critical approaches to interpretation that accord well with Olsen's primary commitments and values: the New Criticism's close reading; E. D. Hirsch's explanation theory, utilizing "subjective probability"; structuralism's validation through examination of narrative logic; and phenomenology's respect for enquiry into the questions that inform a text. I have chosen to describe Ricoeur's multiple approaches, in detail, just prior to their application in the study.

I will contend that Ricoeur's interpretation theory is a valid basis for such a literary enquiry, not only because of its both comprehensive and consistent character, but also because in *Tell Me a Riddle* Olsen's prose itself often seems to translate Ricoeur's academic strategies into more winsome terms. The initial explication of the text and the application of Hirsch's subjective

probability need little defense since they are established methods of literary criticism, but the phenomenological jargon may appear suspect. My choice of this approach is noted midway in the study, and just before introducing Olsen's two major critics, Marguerite Linda Park-Fuller and Elaine Neil Orr; both lay claim to a phenomenological reading, finding Olsen's themes congruent with its emphases on experiential patterns of consciousness, on reduction of bias in order to view "things as they are," and on an interest in all dimensions of the literary experience, including aural effect. I carry their argument further by seeing Olsen's major concerns--the problem of the formation of understanding, the shaping and thwarting influences of history and culture, and the crucial role of expression in human development--as nearly coincident with phenomenology's focus on verifiable possibility, historical conditioning, and the "always-already there" of language (that is, on "understanding" that precedes all interpretation). Thus concepts of objective fact, of the autonomous self, and of language as impartial tool are undercut in phenomenological enquiry; and Tillie Olsen's characters embody each of them in skeptical translation as well.

So I begin with "Tell Me a Riddle," reading for detail and patterns in the text, with few ostensible references to other works or critical studies, and discover Olsen's chief rhetorical strategies to be repetition and refrain, catalogue and ellipsis, contrast and contradiction, and metaphorical expressions derived from the symbolic bases of the work. My effort at explication--what Ricoeur terms the "naive guess"--derives, first, from not finding this preliminary but fundamental approach applied as consistently by other critics and, second, from believing that her title story, in particular, is the touchstone for interpretation of her themes and style.

Examination of the text's subjective probability through analysis of Olsen's rhetorical devices follows the close reading, climaxing with the metaphors and symbols that become clues to the narrative logic of her text, the second stage in Ricoeur's interpretation process; and I introduce this analysis with an explication of Ricoeur's theory that the signification of literary works receives its farthest possible extension in its metaphorically induced "surplus of meaning." In spite of Tillie Olsen's dismissal of the arcane in literary pursuits, Ricoeur's analysis of the function of metaphor and symbol is vindicated, it seems to me, in its application to "Tell Me a

Riddle," which fairly anticipates his reading in its multiple conjunctions and tensive turns. In fact, the tensive nature of personal life, of its social context, and of the language used to express both is a fundamental insight offered the reader of Olsen's fiction.

As follow-up to the "Tell Me a Riddle" analysis, I draw upon an explanation from Richard E. Palmer's *Hermeneutics* of the function of Socratic questioning in phenomenology. With emphasis from this approach on sensing both the fullness and inexhaustibility of any reading of the world, and of its observation through language, I turn next to the first three stories in *Tell Me a Riddle*: "I Stand Here Ironing" (the original "Help Her to Believe") leads to an examination of the nature of discourse and its relation to understanding or "teaching," as discussed in Ricoeur; "Hey Sailor, What Ship?" emphasizes the problem of naming and of discovering a voice, an identity; and "O Yes" ("Baptism") fixes on the contradictions at the heart of an attempt to be faithful to humane values. Through the analysis of all three stories--of a mother's failure to "total it all" in recalling the deprived childhood of her first born, of an old sailor's battle against unjust anonymity, and of a family's eventual capitulation to previously resisted racial sorting--the rhetorical patterns already identified in "Tell Me a Riddle" emerge again as conveyors of a question, a thread, the direction of which is realized only in the last and title work. A discussion of the entire collection, then, reveals the fullest extension of Olsen's signification in its narrative logic which yields an interpretation of the work as a whole; and the effort to uncover the "how" and "what" of Olsen's art is focused again on her major fictional work as its most complete expression. With the appropriation of Olsen's discourse in the context of a current reading, Ricoeur's method of interpretation offers a comprehension that suggests her own insistence upon "understanding."

Following the application of Ricoeur's method to *Tell Me a Riddle*, I present a more detailed history of the development of phenomenological theory and its relation to structuralist semiotics with an examination of David Tracy's work, and this survey becomes the setting for the extension of Palmer's analysis of phenomenology's hermeneutic. Through the description of these two contributions to Ricoeur's theory, his definition of "understanding" is clarified, and the tradition out of which Olsen's major critics write is also established.

I turn then to an examination of the research of Park-Fuller and Elaine Neil Orr, comparing their author-consciousness and reader-response approaches with my emphasis on language theory and style, the three forming a broad phenomenological perspective on Olsen texts. With this background, I survey the critical reception of *Tell Me a Riddle*, both in the 60's and following its reissue in the late 70's, and the characteristic analyses of a variety of interpreters, including Park-Fuller and Orr. From the 50's reading of Tillie Olsen as primarily focused on the family and its struggle to overcome the deprivations of circumstance, I move back in her literary biography to Tillie Lerner, child of Eastern European Jewish immigrants, and to her first publications as the daughter of a socialist family and later affiliate of the Communist Party, in both Nebraska and on the West Coast. From this period the inherent contradiction within her literary themes becomes clearer, and its eventual resolution in her focus on the family's artistic and political struggle is foreshadowed. A series of literary critics who have concentrated on these issues, and on the effects of the economic and political confrontations of the 1930's on those who took them seriously, are the major sources of reference for this section of the study, among them the cultural historians Daniel Aaron and Irving Howe.

Finally, Tillie Olsen's works of the 60's through 80's are examined, with emphasis on their relation to her major themes, expressed in both fiction and non-fiction. Again the critical response is surveyed, and her relation to other writers and to the events of her later life, including the growing recognition of her literary influence, is considered. The survey of her work ends, therefore, with *Silences* (1978), *Yonnondio* (1974), and "Requa I" (1970) and their impact within the critical community.

A chapter proposing future research reflect directions already recognized, and to some degree pursued by her critics, especially genre criticism, sociological studies, and deconstructionist analysis.

The concluding chapter of the present study introduces Frank Kermode's assertion, in his *Genesis of Secrecy*, about the limits of interpretation, which then forms the basis for comment both on Olsen's inclusiveness and on her view of the function of art in human society. I close with reference to her most recent writing, "A Dream Vision," which is her contribution to the work she edited in 1984, *Mother to Daughter*. Critique of this essay is conclusive, not only

chronologically, but because it gathers up her familiar motifs--common life as subject for and threat to literary expression, and the necessity of such expression for personal growth and creative social change--themes subject to that silence which Olsen is committed to expose through her art, in a voice both winsome and instructive. Tillie Olsen's work is candidate for a wide range of analyses and theories, but remains elusive in its service to "something more"--the mark of the artist. Her metaphors issue in a surplus of meaning that reaches for new ways to think and to be, while remaining rooted in symbols that are bound to what she calls the "not-yet-in-the-now." To follow her hermeneutic arc, the world brought to stand in her art, I begin with what I believe to be her most creative period, and then look both back from and forward beyond it, from the context of her work toward its ultimate direction.

CHAPTER II

"TELL ME A RIDDLE": THE GUESS

Immediacy: The Quarrel at the Root

With the words "stubborn . . . shackled . . . swelled . . . split . . . shook," this story of an old man and an old woman erupts (72). And the reactions of each of their children are catalogued in elliptical phrases.

> Why now, why now? wailed Hannah.
>
> As if when we grew up weren't enough, said Paul.
>
> Poor Ma. Poor Dad. It hurts so for both of them, said Vivi. . . .
>
> Knock their heads together, insisted Sammy; . . . .
>
> Lennie wrote to Clara: They've lived over so much together; what could possibly tear them apart? (72-73)

With Tillie Olsen's characteristic economy, two generations of the family whose conflicts will be the focus of this story are introduced, and what follows suggests "[h]ow deep back the stubborn, gnarled roots of the quarrel reached" in a series of dialogues that also identify clearly its chief antagonists (72).

During a cleaning session in the house, they argue, above the "shrilling" of his vacuum and the hearing aid she has "turned down," he for selling the house to join his lodge's Haven--"Happy communal life [to escape a]rthritic hands . . . [p]overty all his life . . . little breath left for running. . . . [T]o be free, to be *care*free" (73). And she, for staying in their home:

> "Because I'm use't."
>
> "Because you're use't? This is a reason, Mrs. Word Miser? Used to can get unused!"
>
> "Enough unused I have to get used to already." (73)

The catalogue of grievances--in truncated sentences, in the Yiddish play on words, in repetitions that become refrains and contrasts that pose contradictions--begins in this first encounter and extends into related controversies throughout the opening section of the story.

"... everything done for you, like a queen."

"I never liked queens."

"No dishes, no garbage, no towel to sop.... "

"And what else would I do with empty hands?" (74)

From such stand-offs as this one over the determinative work of hands, their argument mounts to a plea for culture: "'Look! In their bulletin. A reading circle.... Chekhov they read that you like, and Peretz. Cultured people at the Haven that you would enjoy.'"[4] But all she sees is the contradiction: "'And forty years ago when the children were morsels and there was a Circle, did you stay home with them once so I could go? ... You trained me well. I do not need others to enjoy'" (75). The literal references to hands and circles will move to metaphorical and symbolic allusion as the story develops.

The old woman continues to counter his argument: "'[c]lown, grimacer, floor-mat, yesman, entertainer, whatever they want of you,'" and remembers when he came home late from his meetings and found her nursing the current baby, trying "to stay awake for the only time there was to read.... [S]timulated and ardent, sniffing her skin, [he would] coax: 'I'll put the baby to bed, and you--put the book away, don't read, don't read'" (76). In a final catalogue of "old humiliations and terrors," she recalls "[t]he children's needings; the grocer's face ... she had had to beg credit from ...; the long blocks walked around when she could not pay; ... the soups of meat bones begged 'for-the-dog' one winter..." (76). She concludes she had had to manage; now let him "wrack his head." And the story's initial refrains re-emerge, along with the important frame for the work as a whole--the begged-for soup bone (123):

She would not exchange her solitude for anything.

Never again to be forced to move to the rhythms of others.

For in this solitude she had won to a reconciled peace. (76-77)

Extended italics suggest here, as throughout the story, a character's most intimate, and often unvoiced and reflexive, thoughts. For the house--and the family within it--is no longer "the

enemy: tracking, smudging, littering, dirtying, engaging her in endless defeating battle," and she has found "tranquility" and order in

> [t]he few old books, memorized from rereading; the pictures to ponder (the magnifying glass superimposed on her heavy eyeglasses). Or if she wishes, when he is gone, the phonograph, that if she turns up very loud and strains, she can hear: the ordered sounds and the struggling. (77)

The artistic struggle for order will eventually become an image for, and later the means to, making sense of domestic strife, of life-long contradictions, and of the search for answers to the riddle of existence itself.

But, for now, his television blares, her ear button snaps off, and the misnomers exchanged between them signify their persistently asserted but unexamined differences: "Mr. Importantbusy," "Babbler," and "Mrs. Enlightened," "Mrs. Cultured."[5] The old woman insists that the struggle for order be resolved, and she rejects the invasive TV, which she calls "'only shadows'" (78). But he counters in the story's first reference to her earliest memory:

> "A world comes into your house--and it is shadows. People you would never meet in a thousand lifetimes. Wonders. When you were four years old, . . . did you know of Indian dances, alligators, how they use bamboo in Malaya? No, you scratched in your dirt with the chickens and thought Olshana was the world." (78-79)

The naming, and mutual dismissing, of worlds preoccupies these exchanges

By the close of this first section of the story, the tumult outside the old woman has moved within her: "a ravening inside, a pull to the bed, to lie down, to succumb" (79). He accuses her--"Mrs. Take It Easy". . . . A woman of honey. That's why you're lying down?" (79-80); but, ignoring medical advice to seek the company of others, she retreats, even from her accustomed domestic vigilance: "The birds grew bold that summer and for once pocked the pears undisturbed" (82). Hunger and feeding prove too much for her exhausted sensations and overworked hands. One evening she begs him to stay with her, but he summons again her early life: "'It doesn't seem so good the time of solitary when she was a girl exile in Siberia. . . . A new song for Mrs. Free As a Bird'" (83) and encounters, in return,

> sobbed curses he had not heard in years . . .: Grow, oh shall you grow like an onion, with your head in the ground. Like the hide of a drum shall you be, beaten in life, beaten in death. Oh shall you be like a chandelier, to hang and to burn. . . . (83)

These reminders of her early exile, and of the humor in the old-country phrases from childhood, offer diversion from the tension of their quarrel, but are also foreboding
When she takes to a cot on the porch, he sleeps badly,. . ."so used to her next to him. After all the years, old harmonies and dependencies deep in their bodies; she curled to him, or he coiled to her, each warmed, warming, turning as the other turned, the nights a long embrace" (83-84). In this contrasting image of tender intimacy, the stylistic rhythms and tone of the story turn sweet. And one night, away from the earthy warmth of their shared bed, the old woman welcomes the rain with "faint singing" and finds she can breathe again:

> *She* was singing. Shaking off the drops of rain, the lightning riving her lifted face, he saw her so. . . .
>
> "I can breathe now, . . . my lungs are rich." . . .
>
> A Russian love song of fifty years ago. (84)

Like the country curses and remembered exile, a night in the rain prefigures the struggle ahead, this time with air, water, and fire, that will issue again in singing and a long-forgotten passion.

When the children finally gather to support the old man's demand to sell and move to the Haven, their mother, ridiculed for her "queerness," finds "the solemn after-dinner conclave . . . too probing in and tearing. . . . (Vinegar he poured on me all his life; I am well marinated; how can I be honey now?") (84). Voicing in yet another contrast his earlier sarcasm about her sweet submission, she again refuses to move--

> "For him it is good. It is not for me. I can no longer live between people."
>
> "You lived all your life *for* people," Vivi cried.
>
> "Not with." (85)

--and in a determined plea, the old woman finally declares their impasse.

The repetitions and refrains--"peace," "honey," "the rhythms of others"--along with the epithets that mark the course of their quarrel, have come full circle, and their catalogue of grievances end in the elliptical phrases of this irrevocable stand-off. When Hannah takes her mother home for follow-up tests that her doctor-husband can order, the contrasts between the two old people have posed a contradiction that only a deeper crisis can resolve:

> "There was something after all," Paul told Nancy in a colorless voice. "That was Hannah's Paul calling. Her gall bladder. . . . Surgery." . . . "The cancer was everywhere, . . . [a]t best she has a year. Dad . . . we have to tell him." (86)

The opening pages of "Tell Me a Riddle" establish the situation of the story through the old couple's day-to-day dialogue, spoken and unspoken. Their relentless harangue and silent accusations repeat the condemning memories of a life lived neither "with" nor "for," but "between" people; and their deep-rooted quarrel finally reaches, not only back, but forward as well, into an even more problematic future.

Biography: Episodes From a Life

The second section of the story opens with another plea, this time from the old man:

> Honest in his weakness when they told him, and that she was not to know. "I'm not an actor. . . . Oh that poor woman. I am old too, it will break me into pieces."
>
> But went. And play-acted. (86-87)

His pleas continue with unspoken refrains: "The money, where will come the money?" (87). But her happiness will depend on him; and "Dad--but you have to stay with her" becomes an injunction that will shape his future (88).

The direction of this section continues, however, not so much forward as back and inward, through the old woman's memory of a lifetime only alluded to earlier. Over a new refrain--"Let us go home"--present happenings insistently recall her to those of the past, while her husband's mocking names shift to gentler chiding in order to mollify and protect her--"Mrs. Telepathy," "Mrs. Excited Over Nothing," " Mrs. Inahurry," "Mrs. Suspicious." With visits in their daughters' homes, first Hannah's and then Vivi's, a transcontinental journey begins, for

"[t]he children want to see you . . . as thorny a flower as ever." And, in spite of her demand "[N]ot to travel. To go home," it continues, through seven episodes, each a trigger for the old woman's memory (91).

Initially, the events of her convalescence at Hannah's prompt a "musing; gentleness," except for the rabbi's hospital call and her daughter's request that she light the sabbath candles "[f]or heritage, . . . [f]or the boys, from the past they should have tradition" (89-91). For her response to the rabbi is anything but "musing": "Go away, please, I tell him, I am not a believer Still he stands, while my heart knocks with fright . . . Not for rabbis. At once go and make them change. Tell them to write: Race, human; Religion, none" (89). And to the old man's advice that she co-operate with Hannah's pleasure in the candles her reaction is not "gentle":

> Superstition! . . . 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. (90)

The old man cautions she is no longer "an orator of the 1905 revolution,"[6] but she persists in relating narrow religious practice with domestic and political persecution.[7]

> 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. (90)

Finally, however, she does absolve her daughter of guilt--"Heritage! But when did I have time to teach? Of Hannah I asked only hands to help"--and the first episode repeats its contrasting refrain: "Otherwise--musing; gentleness" (91).

The second opens again with "Not to travel. To go home" (91). And when they finally get off the plane, where Vivi greets them with her new baby, the old woman holds the infant stiffly, away from her, "while a long shudder begins, and the sweat beads on her forehead" (91). At her daughter's home she rests from the journey, remembering in retrospect how

> she had sat, severely and still, her face turned to the sky through which they cleaved and left no scar. . . . The determining, the crucial sky, . . . remote above the dwindled earth, the concealed human life. Vulnerable life, that could scar. (91-92)

Air and earth, symbolizing clarity beyond the marks of injury, are additional images that will recur as the old couple's story unfolds. And a view through a plane window has induced another determining recollection, in an as-yet-indeterminate location:

> There was a steerage ship of memory that shook across a great, circular sea: clustered, ill human beings; and through the thick-stained air, tiny fretting waters in a window round like the airplane's--sun round, moon round. (The round thatched roofs of Olshana.) Eye round--like a smaller window that framed distance the solitary year of exile when only her eyes could travel, and no voice spoke. (92)

Her recognition of air and earth, of ocean waters and of circular images as significant to her life begins with the old woman's reflection on these two passages, even as she continues "not to be able to make herself embrace a baby" (92). For her, at least, their sojourn is moving beyond the immanent demands of feeding and comforting into abstracted memories of a lifetime.

The third episode picks up also from an interval of rest in her youngest granddaughters' bedroom, this time as she listens to the child-sounds and recalls her own child-bearing years: "Still she rode on," in a journey only she is taking, reliving "[t]he love--the passion of tending--[that] had risen with the need like a torrent; and like a torrent drowned and immolated all else" (92). She recalls, by contrast, weaning and its reversals--"the power that was lost in the painful damming back and drying up of what surged," when all that was left was "suffering over lives one felt, but could no longer hold nor help" (92-93). For her, child-bearing had been "torrent" to "desert," but "still the springs . . . were in her seeking. . . . An older power that beat for life. Somewhere coherence, transport, meaning. If they would but leave her in the air now stilled of clamor, in the reconciled solitude, to journey to her self" (93).

The power of birth and of caring in her life now suggests the formative bringing into being of art --"coherence, transport, meaning"--Aristotle's definition upon which the young artist in Joyce's *Portrait* also calls.[8] To realize this potential she invokes again the clarity of air and her earlier claim on "reconciled solitude"--"to journey to her self." Her first air travel has offered a means for distinguishing concrete experience from the withdrawal and reflection upon it, that is, earth/water from air.

The interlude closes on a catalogue of responses to holding a baby once again: "Immediacy to embrace, and the breath of *that* past: warm flesh . . . nuzzled away all else and with lovely mouths devoured; hot-living like an animal" (93). She recalls "the turning maze; the long drunkenness; the drowning into needing and being needed"; and, with the further contrast of water and air, of overwhelming life and life reflected upon, she reacts, once more, "severely":

> and the shudder seized her again, and the sweat. Not that way. Not there, not now could she, not yet. . . .
>
> And all that visit, she could not touch the baby. (93)

With every interval of this section, her memories deepen and intensify through insistent repetitions, through catalogues of struggle and feeling, and through contrasts and contradictions that her memories and her reactions to them express in recurring images and refrains.

She is next carried along into the backyard play of her older grandchildren, of Richard and his rock collection--"*igneous, sedimentary, metamorphic*"--and of Ann and her "(Flat paper dolls with . . . great ringed questioning eyes)" (94-95). Having also helped the two of them rush off to school, checking their "disaster" forms ("evacuate or stay in the city or wait for you to come and take me away"), she finally withdraws and watches all four "whoop after their grandfather who knew how to tickle, chuck, lift, toss, do tricks, tell secrets, make jokes, match riddle for riddle. (Tell me a riddle, Grammy. I know no riddles, child.)" (94). The story's title appears here between descriptions of the grandfather's playfulness and the old woman's chores to help her daughter: "scrubbed . . . folded . . . emptied . . . but to none tended or gave food--and could not touch the baby" (94). Though still functioning on the level of human immediacy, she cannot participate fully, even as awareness of her whole life's unfolding intensifies. In that

deepening dimension of her consciousness, the "great ringed questioning eyes" of Ann's dolls and the subterranean origins of Richard's rocks will return again to query her.

She begs the old man, "Let us go home," for lack of space and the family's immediate demands threaten to suffocate her growing need for air, for contemplation. She argues with him: "'Blind to around you as always: the little ones sleep four in a room because we take their bed. . . . Let us go home.' (To reconciled solitude.)" (94-95). Meanwhile even her protective confinement becomes an assault:

> *. . . the crowded noisy house was listening to her. She could feel it like a great ear pressed under her heart. And everything knocked: quick constant raps: let me in, let me in.*
>
> *How was it that soft reaching tendrils also became blows that knocked? (95)*

At the close of this fourth episode, "*knocked and knocked*" recurs, echo of Sammy's initial advice as the story opens--"knock their heads together" (72)--and of her fear of the visiting rabbi--"my heart knocks with fright" (89)--while another recurring reference contrasts "the maze of the long lovely drunkenness," with "baby sounds; screaming of a mother flayed to exasperation; children quarreling; children playing; singing; laughter" (96). Thus domestic commotion, a "great ear," and "knocking" signify her increasing concentration on sounds; symptomatic of her illness, but more significant to her inward journey, they attack her waning endurance and magnify her growing vulnerability.[9]

Vivi next relives a series of memories "out loud, deliberately, so her mother will know the past was cherished, still lived in her":

> . . . you made everything we wore . . . sang while you sewed. . . . Washed clothes outside. . . . Show[ed] us how to blow our own bubbles with green onion stalks. . . . [T]he Book of Martyrs? . . . You put it on the round table and we'd all look at it together, . . . even a halo from the lamp . . with beaded fringe. . . . [T]he first picture was a bust of Spartacus . . . Socrates? I wish there was something like that for the children. (97)[10 11]

But the old woman silently contradicts her, while she also persists in condemning the old man: "(What I intended and did not? Stop it, daughter, stop it, leave that time. And he, the hypocrite,

sitting there with tears in his eyes--it was nothing to you then, nothing.)" (97-98). Thus she reacts even to affirmations as attacks, indictments.

Furthermore, insubstantial memories, both removed from and related to her experience of space and sound, begin to threaten her. When the old woman retreats again to the little girls' bedroom, she, in fact, hides from the "great ringed questioning eyes" of Ann's dolls by hunching down in the closet--to "sheathe against the listening house, the tendrils and noises that knocked, and Vivi's spilling memories" (9). It is here, in the sixth episode, that immediate sensations of sound and feeling mingle not only with past events but also branch off to encompass all of creation and the beginnings of its evolution. A game of jacks she had watched her granddaughters play reminds her of the six stones that children in her childhood village used instead, and of "the seventh on the back of the hand, toss, catch, and swoop. . ." (99). Richard's description of the three kinds of stone--"earth's fire jetting; rock of layered centuries; crucible new out of the old"--and of a fourth, obsidian[12]--"black glass, never to transform or hold the fossil memory"--elides with "(let not my seed fall on stone)" and with

> . . . an ancient man who fought to heights a great rock that crashed back down eternally--eternal labor, freedom, labor . . . (stone will perish, but the word remain). And you, David, who with a stone slew, screaming: Lord, take my heart of stone and give me flesh. (99)

As the old woman's musing over the universal movement from insensate turmoil to human struggle mixes with a scream from the house beyond, she is carried back once more, this time to

> . . . the common room of the prison, the sun motes dancing in the shafts of light, and the informer being brought in, a prisoner now, like themselves. And Lisa leaping, yes, Lisa, the gentle and tender, biting at the betrayer's jugular. Screaming and screaming.
>
> No, it is the children screaming. Another of Paul and Sammy's terrible fights?
>
> In Vivi's house. Severely: you are in Vivi's house. (99)

The symmetry here is complete, from immanent sensation to life experiences to the lore of creation and back again.

As violent, alienating, and yet most intimate memories (from stone to blood) elide with domestic scenes, past and present, suddenly her granddaughter's body "hurls itself beside her--surprised, smothered laughter, arms surround . . . (Is this where you hide too, Grammy? It's my secret place, we have a secret now)" (99-100). The riddles of grandmother and granddaughter, if not shared, curl up close, side by side, here. And, after her profound retreat from Vivi's reminiscences and into images that coil deep as the explosive fires of rock transformation and the curse of "eternal labor," the old woman is in touch again with those crises that formed her--in the prisons of Siberia and of her own home--as they uncoil into her consciousness.[13] But she has also been touched by the future with which she now holds a common secret. As her "heart of stone" is flesh again, and blood and screaming, again also "the sweat beads, and the long shudder seizes" (100). Even the solitude she constantly seeks inflicts a journey, into a life neither reconciled nor peaceful, a life as the unwitting victim of disease.

The last episode of the section occurs at "the place of farewells and greetings," a comment on the development of the story thus far and on endings and beginnings (101). For the old man has planned to go "not home to death, not yet. . . . Los Angeles first for sun and rest." The old woman suspects the house has been sold, but is reassured: "a prescription . . . to make you healthy" (100-01). As the family says good-bye, "[t]hey look back at her with the eyes of others before them:

> Richard with her own blue blaze; Ann with the nordic eyes of Tim; Morty's dreaming brown of a great-grandmother he will never know; Dody with the laughing eyes of him who had been her springtide love (who stands beside her now); Vivi, all tears.
>
> The baby's eyes are closed in sleep.
>
> *Good-bye, my children.* (101)

Love and separation conspire here in familiar faces that reflect forgotten ones, and in an infant's sleep that prefigures death.

Section Two of "Tell Me a Riddle" concludes with the opening refrains of accusation--"babbler and blind" (95)--and, by contrast, with longing for "a reconciled solitude" or "peace" (93, 95). Memories of childhood link the old woman with recollections from her own

motherhood, and her illness speaks as new phrases double back upon themselves, unrecognized omens of her deterioration: "everything knocked" (89, 95, 96, 98, 100) and "a great ear pressed" (95, 100). As catalogues of her experience multiply references to the increasing effort to hear (89, 92, 96, 98); to see (95); and to make connection with the elements, especially in this section to stone and rock (94, 99). And successive episodes, as the old couple travel from child to child, are introduced and concluded by phrases that frame each sequence: "musing gentleness" and "could not touch the baby." Finally, following the opening reunion in the hospital and a description of the two of them at Hannah's--"Stranger grandsons, tall above the little gnome grandmother, the little spry grandfather" (88)--a refrain has been established that will continue through the remainder of the work, that is, the old woman's plea, "'Let us go home. Let us go home.'"

Creation and History: The Context

The sentence that opens Section Three of "Tell Me a Riddle" suggests the inversions of both relationships and ideas within the story: "It is to the back of the great city he brought her, to the dwelling places of the cast-off old" (101). They settle in a boardwalk apartment, between two amusement piers "rimmed with black benches facing the sand--sand so wide the ocean is only a far fluting" (101).[14] During the season, apartments fill with tourists "come to have sensation made in them," but in winter "they are abandoned to the old" and appear empty "except for the occasional days and hours when the sun, like a tide, sucks [their occupants] out of the low running houses, casts them onto the benches and sandy rim of the walk--and sweeps them into decaying enclosures again" (101-02). Responsive as the cycles of the sea, these unbidden visitors, against an open, off-season canvas, suffer the extraction of sensation also, induced, however, from within by waves of memory.

Their granddaughter, Jeannie, having engaged the apartment in "this gorgeous air," comes to see them in her visiting nurse's uniform, "the lightness of her like a healing." After recovering from the plane ride, the grandmother is coaxed: "'Beautiful it is outside like an ad. Come, Mrs. Invalid, come to taste it.'" And so, on the farthest edge of their adopted country,

and in winter, the old woman glimpses for the first time "the far ruffle of the sea: 'there take me,' and though she leaned against him, it was she who led" (102).

> Plodding and plodding, sitting often to rest. . . . [S]he could see the glistening wet, . . . sat down, pulled off her shoes and stockings, left him and began to run. "You'll catch cold," . . . but the sand in his shoes weighed him down--he who had always been the agile one--and already the white spray creamed her feet
>
> He pulled her back, took a handkerchief to wipe off the wet. . . . "Oh no," she said, "the sun will dry," seized the square and smoothed it flat, dropped on it a mound of sand . . . tied it to a bag--"to look at with the strong glass" (for the first time in years explaining an action of hers)--and lay down with the little bag against her cheek, looking toward the shore that nurtured life as it first crawled toward consciousness the millions of years ago. (102-03)

Like Yiddish folktales and dream accounts,[15] this third section of the story traces the old woman's movement back again, not only in memory, but also geologically, through "the millions of years on a boy's mouth" that she had shared earlier with her grandson (96). Using her strong glass, "cradling it close to her better eye," she studies the intricacies of sand and imagines the first "claw and crawl" of amphibian life, a process her own body is retracing in its devolution.

An episode intervenes when the old couple travel by bus to near-by relatives, and the old woman confronts the polluting smog: "She walked with hands pushing the heavy air as if to open it, whispered: who has done this?" (103). Recovering the breath that her failing body and reviving spirit crave, she rejoins their excursion to "*age as seen on the altered face of those known in youth,*" in the persons of Max and Rose. The old man prays, initially, for "[n]o incidents . . . the old habit betraying of parading the queerness of her for laughter," but she quietly attends to the reminiscences about "Russia fifty-six years ago. Strange words across the Duncan Phyfe table: *hunger; secret meetings; human rights; spies; betrayals; prison; escape*" (104). The episode ends--"No incidents--except that there had been no incidents"--with her first apparent loss of will to resist such public encounters that follows also a first failure of the clarifying air (104).

They resume their seaside excursions, she with her magnifying glass, but "he would sit only on the benches, so she rested at the foot, where slatted bench shadows fell, and unless she turned her hearing aid down, other voices invaded" (104). Thus engrossed in more listening from "the blanket on the sand in the striped shadows, . . . she no longer brought the magnifying glass. He played cards, and she lay in the sun and looked toward the waters. . ." (105). Images here echo her earlier exile, and the condition of a wife as "her husband's footstool" from their argument over the sabbath candles (90). Thereafter, the striped shadows of her new confinement are the extent of "ocean closeness" shared with him--"only a far fluting" (101).

Following these repetitions-with-a-difference from the promising phrases that opened this section of the story, it moves into its climactic episode: "Once, out of the aimless walkers, slow and shuffling like themselves, someone ran unevenly toward them . . . a friend of hers, not his: Mrs Mays" (105). After "[a]ll is told: the children scattered; the husband dead;" she insists they come to the domed auditorium up the shore for the once-a-week community sing that winter residents attend faithfully. The old woman, more and more vulnerable to sensation from within and without, and to the gradually thickening air, once more turns off her hearing aid as they enter the hall and find their places "in the wind of singing, among the thousand various faces of age" (105). She wishes she could also shut off sight as

> *[o]ne by one they streamed by and imprinted on her--and though the savage zest of their singing came voicelessly soft and distant, the faces still roared--faces densed the air--chorded into*
>
> . . . child-chants, mother-croons, singing of the chained love serenades, Beethoven storms, mad Lucia's scream, drunken joy-song, keens for the dead, work-singing. (106)[16]

Thus, in the midst of a town sing, the old woman hears instead a chronicle of songs from her childhood (singing games and lullabys), from her phonograph (symphonies and operas of passion and death), and from folk cultures (celebrations, mourning, and struggle), all evoked by faces. The music, in turn, summons a Chagall-like image:[17]

. . . from floor to balcony to dome a barefooted sore-covered girl threaded the sound-thronged tumult, danced her ecstacy .of grimace to flutes that scratched at a cross-roads village wedding.

Yes, faces became sound, and the sound became weight--pushed, pressed

"Air"--her hands claw his. (105-06)

Reminiscent of "life as it first crawled toward consciousness," the old woman is helped out of the auditorium, "the gray sweat on her face, . . . where she can gulp the air in sob after sob" (106). She is rescued, as from a drowning, for she has passed through a synesthesia of sight and sound and touch where faces roar and chord with the catalogue of music she has stored in her memory from years of surreptitious listening. The ritual singing has transformed linear time and space into synchronic sight, sound, and feeling that merge with a vision of herself in the poverty of her Olshana home. Amid contradictions of an ecstatic vision that "grimaces" and of flutes that "scratch," the old man's original phrase, "you scratched in your dirt with the chickens and thought Olshana was the world" (79) becomes here her own perception of herself dancing to the scratching of chickens, turned flutes, and her own sense that the Olshana she once knew did contain the world as she has come to know it. For her realities are drawing together, past and present, with an interchange of time and sensations that result also in a transformation of meaning: beginning and end coincide. From this episode, "Tell Me a Riddle" moves toward an ultimate oxymoron of deprivation caught in an ecstatic dance in the closing passages of the story.

But first the old woman must undergo the passion begun when she was born, and which now takes a narrower course through a disease yet to be acknowledged. Though the old man resents her succumbing "whenever I enjoy myself," he sees, in "the long shudder," that her agony has begun. With contrasting humor, Mrs. Mays encourages her and mirrors the archetypal image at the auditorium in her saltier allusion to their shared past: "'Remember your advice, easy to keep your head above water, empty things float. Float'" (106-07).

Thus the three move together from the crowded hall and up the street toward Mrs. Mays' apartment, "the singing a fading march for them, tall woman with a swollen leg, weaving little man, and the swollen thinness they help between them" (107). The delicate description here

leads to a darker elliptical style as the patient recovers enough to examine her friend's room with the "gorgeous view":

> The stench along into the slab of room. A washstand for a sink, a box with oilcloth tacked around for a cupboard, a three-burner gas plate. Artificial flowers, colorless with dust. Everywhere pictures foaming: wedding, baby, party, vacation, graduation, family pictures. From the narrow couch under a slit of window, sure enough the view: lurching rooftops and a scallop of ocean heaving, preening, twitching under the moon. (107)

Mrs. Mays' life, reduced to an oceanic catalogue of silent faces and occasions from the past, is fixed now on a narrowing view from under a cover of dust. And the Pacific, here reduced to a scallop shell (symbol of resurrection), merely heaves, preens, and twitches

The old man struggles with his fright over the future (94, 100) while trying to calm his wife's horror at this "one room like a coffin . . . [s]hrinking the life of her."

> Rooms and rooms like this   I lie on the quilt and hear them talk
>
> Please, Mrs. Orator-without-Breath
>
> Once you went for coffee   I walked   saw A Balzac   a Chekhov to write it
>
> Rummage Alone On scraps
>
> Better old here than in the old country!
>
> On scraps   Yet they sang like   like   Wondrous!
>
> *Humankind   one has to believe*   So strong for what?   To rot   not grow? (107-08)

Invoking nineteenth-century realism's great exposés,[18] the old woman's oratory, however truncated, increases in vehemence with each repetition: "Shrinking the life of her . . . not to grow? . . . Unused   the life in them. . . . all in us   not   to grow" (107-08).

Her anger climaxes, not like Lucia's gothic scream, but in a cry for the future of the whole of humanity: "And when will it end. Oh, *the end.*" *That* nightmare thought, and this time she writhed, crumpled against him, seized his hand (for a moment again the weight, the soft distant roaring of humanity) and on the stangled-for breath, begged: "Man . . . we'll destroy ourselves?" (108). Her eliding of faces into sound became, at the community sing, the weight

upon her of a suffocating thinness of air Here, as she continues to gasp for breath, her effort parallels the struggle to comprehend, and then to question human fate. Finally, with a sudden shift, the sequence does clarify, only to focus on the most personal--and universal--of quandaries: And looking for answer--in the helpless pity and fear for her (for *her*) that distorted his face--she understood the last months, and knew that she was dying" (108).

With this intrusion as its climax, Section Three of "Tell Me a Riddle"--the arrival of the old couple at the ocean's edge, the routine they adopt for daily outings, their meetings with family, with Mrs. Mays, and in the music hall--has become comment, not only on individual histories, but upon the course of life itself. The old couple reach "this gorgeous air,"the "lightness and brightness" of Jeannie, "the shore that nurtured life as it first crawled toward consciousness," and move into another dimension, "between a long straight paving," but where the ocean is still "only a far fluting." Joining "the abandoned old," they enter a "cast-off . . . empty . . . swept . . . decaying" winter scene, and view aging "on the face of those known in youth" with whom they recount their history in detached abstractions: "*hunger; secret meetings; human rights; spies; betrayals. . . .* "Breathing" and "the wind of singing" evoke the old woman's wish to turn off sight as well as hearing as she confronts the "*streamed . . . roared . . . densed . . . chorded . . . faces become sound.*" While "*pushed, pressed,*" she claws her way to "gulp the air in sob after sob" (101-05). And her response to the song on a sea of faces, as to a grain of sand and the feel of the "creamed" sea, draws her back to the first beaching of life on the shore and to her own memories on a road outside Olshana. Thus, on the "far-fluting" edge of life (of the ocean shore and of her own mortality), she encounters its potential and promise "unused," smothered--in the expanse of empty sand itself, in smog, in the faces of the old, in the stench and slab of a room where dead flowers and photographs "foam," and in the Chekhovian poor who "[r]ummage [a]lone [o]n scraps . . . On scraps Yet they sang like like Wondrous!" Before the final section closes, the old woman will again beg, with "strangled-for breath," for "Singing" (108-09).

With this recognition of life's contrasting potential and limitation, she faces also its deep personal contradiction: one comes such a long way, from rock and sea and sand, to roar with singing and gasp for air, only to discover "man . . . we'll destroy ourselves?" translated suddenly

into "the helpless pity and fear" for one's own dying. With such awareness, the final reversal begins which will take her, not only back to her own beginnings, but forward into the most mysterious, most concrete struggle, with death.

Reversal: The Passion

The last section of "Tell Me a Riddle" opens with the name-calling old man, himself still nameless, not yet having undergone catharsis in "the helpless pity and fear for her that overtook him," but about to find a guide on the passage ahead. The querilous old woman, on the other hand, faces the terror from within, for now there is "time to remember, to sift, to weigh, to estimate, to total"--phrases with which the collection begins (9)--as she persistently struggles "to understand." Section Four begins as the old woman repeats her litany--"Let us go home"--but a reversal of roles follows their mutual acknowledgement of her approaching death: "She saw the fiction was necessary to him, was silent; then: 'At home I will get better. If the doctor here says?'" (109).

Mirroring the opening of Section Three, Jeannie comes to take her out for air, and the old woman visits again the water's edge, but this time at the end of a pier

> . . . past the boarded concessions, the hooded and tented amusement rides. . . . They watched the spent waves feeding the new, the gulls in the clouded sky; even up where they sat, the wind-blown sand stung.
>
> She did not ask to go down the crooked steps to the sea. (109)

The sibilant alliterations, along with the resigned tone of the modifiers and of the final sentence, introduce the somber mood of the closing section, while a contrasting theme of natural renewal--"spent waves feeding the new"--echoes earlier references: "rock of layered centuries; crucible new out of old" (90) and "[t]hey look back at her with the eyes of others before them" (101). Feeding is another positive figure that will return in this section, contradicting her earlier "to none tended or gave food" (94). And both endings and beginnings will come to focus in the relationship of grandmother and granddaughter. The contrast between the two is made again--in the oxymoron "tired from the pleasure of you"--and then contradicted as they recognize their mutual feeding.

When the old woman repeats her question, "'Can I go home?'" Jeannie responds, and then changes the subject Admitting that "'[o]f course, poor Granny[, y]ou want your own things around you,'" she draws from her purse and unwraps a large cookie, intricately shaped like a little girl. "Look at the curls . . . and the darling eyelashes. I just came from a house where they were baking them." "The dimples, there in the knees," she marveled, holding it to the better light, turning, studying, "like art. Each singly they cut, or a mold?" (109). The carefully formed doll, Jeannie explains, is the likeness of a real Mexican child, Rosita, whom she had once helped nurse, and who had died only the day before. The child's mother cut out each doll, "*Pan del Muerto*, the Bread of the Dead,"[19] one ritual among traditional observances: dancing to the child's favorite songs, viewing the coffin in the house--"There are candles"--and celebrating a yearly feast night, "with candles," when they "picnic on the graves of those they loved till dawn" (110). This brief dialogue introduces the closing form and themes of "Tell Me a Riddle"--observation and response--with concentration on feeding and mourning, on commemorating a life through dance and art, and on the gift of the young to the old, the old to the young.

But the grandmother responds to Jeannie with her insistent humanistic view--"'the living must comfort themselves,'"--asking also to keep "'the Rosita . . . on the dresser where I can see; something of my own around me'" (110). With this repetition of its initial phrase, the episode ends. The contrast in the observances of a death--a young girl's and an old woman's--will frame the final account of the dying grandmother's last days.

Jeannie confides in her grandfather that she has quit her job in order to reconsider "'what I want to do, maybe go back to school, maybe go to art school.'" Thus her attention to her "Granny" increases as the old woman succumbs to fever, weakens, and moves to "a rented hospital bed that stood beside the double bed he slept in alone now" (111). Afternoons and evenings the old man goes out with his cronies; Mrs. Mays comes to help, but Jeannie is most often on duty.

Through dialogue with visitors, spoken and unspoken, the episodes that follow open up, primarily to herself, the formative events and resources of the old woman's life. And images emerge in and around the bed-ridden patient as if from those "springs . . . in her seeking. Somewhere an older power that beat for life" (93). With Jeannie's radio turned low, she lies

"curled on her side, her knees drawn up, intense in listening (Jeannie sketched her so, coiled, convoluted like an ear) . . . concealing tears" (111). A young friend comes to perform for her "a dance of his native Samoa. . . . [and with] a tiny thrumming sound . . . she strove to repeat the beckon, flight, surrender of his hands, the fluttering footbeats and his low plaintive calls" (112). When their children send flowers, her husband puts one in her hair: "the pulsing red flower, the yellow skull face; . . . a desolate, excited laugh shuddered from her . . . but [she] let the flower burn" (112). Thus she embodies the "thorny flower" he had earlier dubbed her, the "great ear" of her own sensations, and the dancing, burning form she has envisioned from her past, in gestures that recapitulate her own journey--"beckon, flight, surrender."

Another reversal begins when Lennie and Helen visit She who in life had grown taciturn, "now in dying, spoke incessantly."

> In a half-whisper: "Like Lisa she is, your Jeannie. Have I told you of Lisa who taught me to read? Of the highborn she was, but noble in herself. I was sixteen; they beat me; my father beat me so I would not go to her. It was forbidden, she was a Tolstoyan. At night, past dogs that howled, terrible dogs, my son, in the snows of winter to the road, I to ride in her carriage like a lady, to books. To her, life was holy. Everything that happens one must try to understand why. She killed one who betrayed many. Because of betrayal, betrayed all she lived and believed. In one minute she killed, before my eyes. . . . All that happens, one must try to understand. . . ." (112-13)[20]

The old woman's most formative experience finally reaches full expression as she reveals both the whole story and her life-long resolution to keep faith with its motivating sources: devotion to learning; recognition of the sacredness of life; condemnation of betrayal of another, or of a community or a cause; and, especially, commitment, in whatever transpires, to the effort to understand. Suddenly released by delirium, the silence of years is broken, and her family becomes audience to the storied memories and deep convictions she has authored by her life

Another revelation follows:

> "The name?" Her lips would work. "The name that was their pole star; the doors of the death houses fixed to open on it; I read of it in my year of penal

> servitude. Thuban!" very excited. "Thuban, in ancient Egypt the pole star. Can you see, look out to see it, Jeannie, if it swings around *our* pole star that seems to *us* not to move.
>
> "Yes, Jeannie, at your age my mother and grandmother had already buried children . . . yes, Jeannie, it is more than oceans between Olshana and you . . . yes, Jeannie, they danced, and for all the bodies they had they might as well be chickens, and indeed, they scratched and flapped their arms and hopped. (113)

The conviction that all perspectives are relative is expressed in the contrast here between fixed rituals from the Book of the Dead[21] and the interchangeability of the pole stars, between the world of her childhood and that of Jeannie, her surrogate Lisa. From the scratching of chickens to that of flutes in its first two appearances (79, 106), the image of Olshana now pictures its inhabitants themselves dancing, but with emaciated bodies mistaken for chickens The confusion of species in poverty, however, also confirms both animal need and the longing for human expressiveness.

The ambiguity of human life is voiced also through quotations from her few books--"'Pain I answered with tears; baseness with indignation, meanness with repulsion . . . for life may be hated or wearied of, but never despised'" (113). The old woman immediately responds to these quandaries with echoes from earlier encounters:

> "Tell them who ask: no rabbis, no ministers, no priests, no speeches, no ceremonies: ah, false--let the living comfort themselves. Tell Sammy's boy, he who flies, tell him to go to Stuttgart and see where Davy has no grave. And what?" A conspirator's laugh. "And what? where millions have no graves--save air." (113-14)

The images of life forgotten, betrayed, abstracted into air, in references to both fighter pilots and crematoria victims of a war that reduced both to ashes, draw from her a derisive laughter, which quickly changes to "unconcealed tears." But she also insists, "'The music . . . still it is there and we do not hear; knocks, and our poor ears too weak. What else, what else we do not hear?'" (114). The air, that bore the flyers' bodies to their destruction is also a vehicle for their commemoration in art. Later, after knocking over pills the old man gives her, she cries, "'Let me

feel what I feel,'" and laughs as he gropes to retrieve them. But "[n]ighttimes her hand reached across the bed to hold his" (114). For the dying old woman, speaking and listening, human feeling and touch, and, especially, music all express her deepening perception, just as visual art will eventually communicate beyond her capacity to do so, when "the living must comfort themselves."

In a persistent effort to understand, beyond her waning energy, the old woman focuses, finally, upon her husband:

Her breath was too faint for sustained speech now, but still the lips moved:

When no longer necessary to injure others

Pick pick pick Blind chicken

As a human being responsibility

"David!" imperious, "Basin!" (114)

Naming him out of impelling need, she also identifies her reference to victims of the pecking order[22] with her own vulnerability. For, when she sees a suitcase being packed, she fears the hospital and defends her claim to identity: "'Where now do you drag me? . . . Not home yet? . . . Where *is* my home?'" (115). The old man stammers, but, in another shape-change,[23]

. . . [d]eftly, like a snake, she had slithered out of bed and stood swaying . . . .

"Coward," she hissed, "runner."

"You stand," he said senselessly. . . .

"Weakling," she taunted, "to leave me there and run. Betrayer. All your life you have run." (115)

This reversal of Eden's accuser and accused--her version of the righteous snake, its venomous attack justified--shatters the old man, but Jeannie dissuades him from giving up: "'She needs you Grandaddy. . . . Isn't that what they call love?'" (115). And so, instead, they install "the tall hooked pillar that held the solutions . . . to feed her veins" (116). In her rejection of the hospital, her repeated accusation--"Betrayer"--has appeared again, this time in a reference, beyond one cowardly act, to the relationship of a lifetime.

When Jeannie moves into their building, "her face so radiant," it is her grandfather who becomes suspicious and asks, "'you are in love?'" He is not prepared for her reply: "(Shameful

the joy, the pure overwhelming joy from being with her grandmother; the peace, the serenity, that breathed.)" "My darling escape," she answered incoherently, "my darling Granny"--as if that explained (116). The attachment between the two women, then, includes "the peace . . . that breathed," given to her granddaughter by an old woman who is still seeking it herself. For Jeannie, at least, responding to need does produce "what they call love."

By contrast, the children come "[t]oo late to ask 'and what did you learn with your living, Mother, and what do we need to know?'" First Clara, the oldest, and then their son, offer silent accusations and farewells:

> *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. . . .*
>
> *She hears that music, that singing from childhood; forgotten sound--not heard since, since. . . . And the hardness breaks like a cry: Where did we lose each other, first mother, singing mother?. . .*
>
> *I do not know you, Mother. Mother, I never knew you.*
>
> Lennie, suffering not alone for her who was dying, but for that in her which never lived (for that which in him might never live). For him too, unspoken words: *good-bye Mother who taught me to mother myself.* (116-17)

The old woman's earlier reaction to Vivi's gratitude for the Book of the Martyrs and the belief it instilled--"(What I intended and did not)"--is confirmed as she is once again robbed of the chance "[t]o look back and learn what humanizes--this to teach" (90). In spite of her conviction that in "[a]ll that happens, one must try to understand," her own children do not listen to who she is as she dies. For them it is clearly not yet "time to remember . . . to total"; instead they confirm her fear: "unused the life in them . . . all in us not to grow" (108).

During the opening incidents of this final section of "Tell Me a Riddle," the old woman has for the last time walked to the edge of the sea and, afterward, traced the rituals of death, from mourning practices in a Mexican family to murder among exiles in Siberia, from ancient burial rites of the Pharaohs to depredations within a poultry yard. Now, in the aftermath of their children's visits, the old man begins the lonely vigil beside his "Mrs. Miserable," "Mrs.

Philosopher," "Mrs. Babbler," "Mrs. Live Alone," as his habit of name-calling returns to mark his struggle. For as his wife utters their memory's most intimate hopes and fears, he will react with bitterness and rejection.

Racked by cancer, the old woman's body reflects the devolution going on within it:[24]

> Light she grew, like a bird, and, like a bird, sound bubbled in her throat while the body fluttered in agony. Night and day, asleep or awake . . . the songs and the phrasing leaping. . . . The little claw hands, the beaked shadow on her face; the throat, bubbling, straining.
>
> He tried not to listen, as he tried not to look on the face in which only the forehead remained familiar, but trapped with her the long nights in that little room, the sounds worked themselves into his consciousness. . . . (117)

And the old woman's chants, fragments of oratory, and stanzas from old hymns begin to reach beyond her consciousness and into his as the sounds of the trapped bird play upon him:

> *Even in reality* (swallow) *life's lack of it*
>
> *Slaveships   deathtrains   clubs   eeenough*
>
> *The bell   summon what enables*
>
> *78,000 in one minute* (whisper of a scream) *78,000 human beings   we'll destroy ourselves?* (118)[25]

Historical references, to genocide through slavery, the Holocaust, and the Bomb, echo and confirm her earlier expressions of horror in Mrs. Mays' room. He answers, "'Aah, Mrs. Miserable . . . all your life working, and now in bed you lie, servants to tend, . . . and still you work. Such hard work it is to die?'" (118). With a new-found attentiveness, his journey back through the fulfillment and deprivation of their life together has begun.

Her body thrashes, her hand clings to his, and the old man hears "a melody, ghost thin," seeing her again, "like a guilty ghost, the vision of her bent in listening to it, silencing the record instantly he was near. . . . And tried to think when she had first played it . . . but could reconstruct nothing. . . .

> *No man one   except through others*
>
> *Strong   with the not yet   in the now*
>
> *Dogma dead   war dead   one country.* (118)

As he listens to the old woman's beliefs, confirmed through her "words from books"--that human beings are first corporate before individual, that the present is already potent with the future (tenets familiar to Judaism)--still he hears only rejection:

> And it seemed to him that for seventy years she had hidden a tape recorder . . . within her, that it had coiled infinite mile on mile, trapping every song, every melody, every work read, heard, and spoken--and that maliciously she was playing back only what said nothing of him, of the children, of their intimate life together.
>
> "Left us indeed, Mrs. Babbler, . . . called others babbler and cunningly saved your words. A lifetime you tended and loved, and now not a word of us, for us. Left us indeed? Left me." (118-19)

Weapon against his wife's years of silence that are suddenly released in her onslaught of words, his solitaire deck is his own form of withdrawal, shuffling and slapping down the cards. But she persists in her delirium:

> *Lift high the banner of reason* (tatter of an orator's voice) *justice freedom light*
> *Humankind life worthy capacities*
> *Seeks* (blur of shudder) *belong human being* (119) [26]

In the on-rush of her elliptical speech-making, he accuses her: "'[A]nd what human beings did *you* seek around you, Mrs Live Alone, and what humankind think worthy?'" (119). Even in the irony of their now separate monologues, the disparity widens between this mismatch of gifts and insights--her lonely Tolstoyan idealism and proud reserve, informed by a deep communalism, his amiability and natural goodwill, set off from her sensitivity like obsidian, "black glass, never to transform or hold the fossil memory" (99). But then

> he remembered she had not always been isolated, had not always wanted to be alone (as he knew there had been a voice that broke from silence to lash, make incidents, shame him--a girl's voice of eloquence that spoke their holiest dreams). But again he could construct, image, nothing of what had been before, or when, or how, it had changed. (119)

As the old woman's curses threaten to materialize--". . . like an onion with your head in the ground. Like the hide of a drum . . . beaten . . . like a chandelier, to hang, and to burn. . . ." (83)--he reverts to his card game: "Ace, queen, jack." The shadow of the pillar beside the bed falling "in two tracks" and its reflection in the mirror--"a moonlike blob, the empty solution bottle"--suggest their parallel lives and the glaring absence between them (119).

The word, however, did "work in him," and it is he now who laughs bitterly as he remembers the phrase she has quoted: "Hah, good you do not know what you say; good Victor Hugo died and did not see it, his twentieth century'" (119). With this indictment of the inadequacies of nineteenth-century idealism that issued in the horrors of the twentieth, he takes refuge again in his card game. But she persists:

> *These things shall be, a loftier race than e'er the world hath known shall rise with flame of freedom in their souls and light of knowledge in their eyes*
>
> King, four, jack "in the twentieth century, hah!"
>
> *They shall be gentle, brave and strong to spill no drop of blood, but dare all . . .*
>
> *on earth and fire and sea and air . . .*
>
> *And every life* (long strangling cough) *shall be a song* (120)[27]

With her final "gathering all together again" (9)--from the elements of creation to the call for music--the cards fall from his hands, and he moves beyond sarcasm; for

> the bereavement and betrayal he had sheltered--compounded through the years--hidden even from himself--revealed itself,
>
> uncoiled,
>
> released,
>
> *sprung*
>
> and with it the monstrous shapes of what had actually happened in the century. (120)

As the old man finally confronts his own concealed tape--the evil, both social and personal, set loose in his lifetime--the ravening the old woman felt earlier now seizes him in the

form of a simple hunger, but reflecting those of a lifetime left unfed. He tries to leave her--"'you have finished your night snack, Mrs. Cadaver, now I will have mine.'"--but tears surprise him: "Whispered: 'Lost, how much I lost'" (121).

Returning to the argument, this time he takes first his part, and then hers:

> Escaped to the grandchildren . . . never hungered . . . unravaged by disease . . . a head taller than their grandparents . . . beautiful skins, straight backs, clear straightforward eyes. "Yes, you in Olshana," he said to the town of sixty years ago, "they would be nobility to you."
>
> And was this not the dream then, come true in ways undreamed? he asked.
>
> *And are there no other children in the world?* he answered, as if in her harsh voice.
>
> *And the flame of freedom, the light of knowledge?*
>
> *And the drop, to spill no drop of blood?* (121)

With the dilemmas unresolved between Enlightenment idealism, Jewish communalism, and Marxist struggle, he is exhausted suddenly over the long hours ahead before the doctor's visit when he will beg him to mercifully stop the feeding solutions: "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" (121-22). Does her faithfulness to them, in her dying breath, somehow restore the corrupted phrases?

Tempted to get help, instead he does not run this time, but goes back, "checked her pulse, gently tended with his knotty fingers as Jeannie had taught" (121). He reaches for her hand and, as it "crawled across the covers for his, [c]ompassionately he enfolded it." In another kind of synaesthesia, her sensitivities become his as he sees and hears and feels *for* her: foaming words, ravening sensations, and the world of their youth--"dark, ignorant, terrible with disease--how was it that living in it, in the midst of corruption, filth, treachery, degradation, they had not mistrusted man nor themselves; had believed so beautifully, so . . . falsely?" (122). The question pursues him.

He even imagines promoting their story--"'Aaah, children . . . how we believed, how we belonged"--packaging it so he can "stand on corners, in front of stadiums and on crowded

beaches, knock on doors, give it as a fabled gift," distanced and outdated by the destructive events of the century: *"that joyous certainty, that sense of mattering, of moving and being moved, of being one and indivisible with the great of the past, with all that freed, ennobled"* (122). Suddenly mocking himself--"'Why not in cereal boxes, in soap packages?'"--he accuses her, "'Ah, you have taken my senses, cadaver.'" But, as her body writhes and her mouth reacts in spasms, he continues to take her part instead, providing the words, the images, "crossing over" to the vision they once shared: "(Her lips moving as she read, poring over the Book of the Martyrs, the magnifying glass superimposed over the heavy eyeglasses.) Still she believed? "Eva!" he whispered. "Still you believed? You lived by it? These Things Shall Be?" (122-23).

Moved, finally, to speak her name,[28] to acknowledge her fully present and even, perhaps, among the martyrs, he receives in reply, as she abruptly finds her voice again,

> "One pound soup meat," she answered distinctly, "one soup bone."
>
> "My ears heard you. Ellen Mays was witness: 'Humankind . . . one has to believe.'" Imploringly: "Eva!"
>
> "Bread, day-old." She was mumbling. "Please, in a wooden box . . . for kindling. The thread, hah the thread breaks. Cheap thread"--and a gurgling, enormously loud, began in her throat.
>
> "I ask for stone: she gives me bread--day-old." (123)

While she returns to the daily struggle with poverty, his ironic turn on the passage from scripture ("Or what man of you, if his son asks him for a loaf, will give him a stone?")[29] evokes earlier rock imagery as he pleads for what is lasting and dependable. With a rebuke against riddles--"Who wanted questions? Everything you have to wake?"--the old man responds dully, "Ah, let me help you turn, poor creature." For even after he has spoken in her voice, named her, and, finally, turned her body in her stead, she is still answering those questions with the pentecostal clarity of mothering's most concrete encounters:

> Words jumbled, cleared. In a voice of crowded terror:
>
> "Paul, Sammy, don't fight."
>
> "Hannah, have I ten hands?"

"How can I give it, Clara, how can I give it if I don't have?" (123)

Still he resists her despair: "'You lie, . . . there was joy too.' Bitterly: 'Ah, how cheap you speak of us at the last.'" Then,

> As if to rebuke him, as if her voice had no relationship with her flailing body, she sang clearly, beautifully, a school song the children had taught her when they were little; begged:
>
> "Not look my hair where they cut. . . ."
>
> (The crown of braids shorn.) And instantly he left the mute old woman poring over the Book of the Martyrs; went past the mother treading at the sewing machine, singing with the children; past the girl in her wrinkled prison dress, hiding her hair with scarred hands, lifting to him her awkward, shamed, imploring eyes of love; and took her in his arms, dear, personal, fleshed, in all the heavy passion he had loved to rouse from her. (123-24)

He has argued her part with himself (and before whatever throne of grace she may require); heard her confession to their children, her earlier penitence over the signs of servitude in her hair, her dress, her scarred hands; and, now, encircling it all within an embrace, knowing and unknowing, he calls to her again: "'Eva!' Her little claw hand beat the covers. How much, how much can a man stand?" For she is beyond the hearing, knowing, with which, he now recognizes, she was once filled. He turns to the cards, the beds, the dresser drawers--anything to distract him--moving "his hand bit by bit over the mirror to see what of the reflection he could blot out with each move, and felt that at any moment he would die of what was unendurable" (124).

Scorned, hissed at, wooed, and sung to, the old man, David--cornered--finally connects with his own hunger, his own questions, and, fully captive to love, finds it "unendurable." He is again about to call for help when he

> looked down, saw on Jeannie's sketch pad the hospital bed, with *her*; the double bed alongside with him; the tall pillar feeding into her veins, and their hands, his and hers, clasped, feeding each other. And as if he had been instructed he went to his bed, lay down, holding the sketch (as if it could shield against the monstrous

> shapes of loss, of betrayal, of death) and with his free hand took hers back into his.
>
> So Jeannie found them in the morning. (124)

A resource for faithfulness in the thin new air of his solitude--"'She needs you, Grandaddy. . . . Isn't that what they call love?'"--a likeness of the two of them, sketched while they slept, shows him it is possible they have, after all, been together.

But there is a final passion the old woman must yet undergo:

> The last day the agony was perpetual. Time after time it lifted her almost off the bed, so they had to fight to hold her down. He could not endure and left the room; wept as if there never would be tears enough.
>
> Jeannie came to comfort him. In her light voice she said: Grandaddy, don't cry. She is not there, she promised me. On the last day, she said she would go back to when she first heard music, a little girl on the road of the village where she was born. She promised me. It is a wedding and they dance, while the flutes so joyous and vibrant tremble in the air. Leave her there, Grandaddy, it is all right. She promised me. Come back, come back and help her poor body to die.
>
> ---
>
> *For two of that generation*
> *Seevya and Genya*
> *Death deepens the wonder*
>
> (125)

Because of the promise that "on the last day" the beginning would return and become the end, the liberation of Eva's oldest and most intimate memory--of flutes that "tremble in the air"--is released, finally, through Jeannie who has fully seen and heard her grandmother, and from her received the freedom to let death deepen the mystery.

Beginning with the old couple's deep-rooted quarrel, earth-bound in its intimate tenacity, and going back through the old woman's childhood, revolutionary politics, and family nurturing, "Tell Me a Riddle" chronicles the interrelatedness of life. The old woman's consciousness develops, from fiery creativity's explosive expression, in passages through the seas of experience

and, beyond, to struggle for the rarefied air of human expression and freedom. The first three sections of the story address these themes through accounts of a year of dying, of four generations of family history, and of the natural and historical contexts of both Repetitions and refrains express a longing for a return home, for reconciliation, and for understanding, and catalogues and elliptical phrases reveal the uncontainable variety and scope of an individual life and of a family, while the story's contrasts and resulting contradictions maintain the struggle and the questioning. In Section Four, however, the movement from immanent circumstance to biography to timeless insights and quandaries is reversed as the old woman's final passion completes the cycle of earth to air to earth and leads her back from abstractions to their earliest sources in the daily struggle to live, and in her work to die.

The final section of the story begins with a last walk to the shore where they do not go "down the crooked steps to the sea" (109); with a gift, the Bread of the Dead, left untasted--images for unrealized baptism and absolution; and with the "coiled, convoluted ear" that the old woman's body becomes, and the "beckon, flight surrender" of her dancing and storied hands (111-12). Understanding focuses on "the forbidden Tolstoyan" for whom life was holy (112), but who killed because of betrayal; moves to the old woman's memories of the Egyptian Book of the Dead and her later revelation about the relativity of their pole star; and ends with her condemnation of false conspirators--"no rabbis, no ministers, no priests, no speeches, no ceremonies" (113)--that bury millions in the abstracted air.

Constant wretching and the "knock" of pain produce in her emaciated body bird-like fluttering and unlikely song. And, in spite of failing breath, she confronts each image that assaults her with her resolute commitment "to understand." As the old woman's life unwinds in a reversal from the abstractions of her early oratory and favorite quotations to her most concrete efforts to alleviate human need, she exposes violence--the "Pick pick pick of the blind chicken," the cowardice of her mate who always runs, the self-absorption of her children who condemn her rather than listen. And as her body reverts to its earlier, evolutionary form, she reveals a lifetime of learning from old books, from memorized speeches, and, especially, from music she has harbored, but never shared: "still it is there and we do not hear; knocks and our poor human ears too weak. What else, what else we do not hear?" (114).

David lashes back in cynical frustration as her hidden life uncoils in the lofty phrases of a favorite hymn; and he finally mirrors her attack, her hissing "Betrayer," when the "bereavement and betrayal he had sheltered . . . revealed itself, uncoiled, released, *sprung*," both the old woman's and the century's. Faced with his personal loss, he takes up the dialogue, arguing both sides of their quarrel: "*And are there no other children in the world?*" (121). With his turn toward her words, "stained; that on her working lips came stainless," he calls her name for the first time--"'Eva'"--and she replies, "'One pound soup meat . . . Bread, day-old" (123). For in her journey back to the immanent, day-by-day fight against deprivation she has abandoned the air of abstraction, along with the ambiguous foundation stone of evolutionary history, for the simpler elements of soup and bread, a feeding, eucharistic image that leaves her antagonist mate even more despairing: "'I ask for stone [for reassurance]; she gives me bread. . . .'" In her delirium, she goes on to quiet their children's quarrels, to bewail her lack of hands enough to care . . . to give, and sings an old song their children taught her. Begging him also "'not to look my hair where they cut . . . '" ("the crown of braids, shorn" a near homonym for "the crown of thorns"), she incites his reply: "'There was joy too. . . . Ah, how cheap you speak of us at the last'" (123); and he moves back past "the mute old woman . . . the mother . . . the girl . . ." to lift her in his arms with the old passion, but it is finally no match for the present one. Rejecting his solitaire cards, the bed, the reflection in the mirror, and realizing that his life, lived alone, is and has been "unendurable," he catches sight of Jeannie's sketch of their sleeping forms, "with hands clasped, feeding each other" (124); and he lies down again next to one he has, finally, even turned, taking her hand--and what they shared, after all, in life--back into his own.

On the last day, Jeannie reassures him that Eva has promised "to go back to when she first heard music, a little girl on the road of the village," as she calls him to "come back," and to "help her poor body to die" (125). At the end, the taught coil has sprung, the unyielding roles reversed: she has become the babbler; he, the caretaker; he, the orator; she, in reconciled solitude, the dancer. Their struggle has led to his crossing over to take her part, and to clasped hands; their journey, circled back to a girl on a road; the catalogues, simplified to the petition for "one soup bone . . . bread--day-old." With the sound of "flutes that tremble in the air," all the contrasts have ended in a promise--"to go back"--in a decision--"to come back"--and in a prediction about

both life and art as they work toward the "not yet in the now." In the words of the collection's sub-title, "These Things Shall Be."

CHAPTER III

RHETORICAL STRATEGIES AS MEANS:

EXPLANATION / VALIDATION

"'The music,' she said, 'still it is there and we do not hear; knocks, and our poor human ears too weak. What else, what else we do not hear?'" (114). Near the close of the story, the old woman's continuing effort to understand the experiences of a lifetime is mirrored in this analogy, that is, in her life-long attentiveness to music, "the ordered sounds and the struggling" (77). The term "knock," which first described, literally, a means to restore the old couple's senses (Sammy's opening lines of advice) and was later used as a figure for the old woman's subjection to fear, to noise and to pain (89-100), here becomes an invitation "to understand." The next exchange refers again to the literal act--"she knocked his hand aside" (114)--as her husband attempts to administer her medicine; and again, near the close of the the story, he proposes to "knock on doors" with the invitation to share their old belief and sense of belonging (122). The creative and contrasting uses of the word, but especially its reference to the chance to hear fully, is an appropriate introduction from the story itself to an effort at interpretation, to come to terms with all its convolutions.

Paul Ricoeur, in his study of the function of language, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning*, identifies three stages in the analysis of a work of discourse: understanding as naive guess; validation-explanation as mediation between two stages of understanding; and understanding as comprehension, or appropriation that overcomes the original distancing of written communication (75). According to Ricoeur, "the initial guess attempts to construe the meaning as the verbal meaning of the text" and is largely "divinatory," that is, done without rules (74). It views the work as a whole, as an individual representative of a genre, and as having potential horizons of meaning. This process, Ricoeur observes, is circular, an effort to judge the relative importance of parts of the work in their contribution to the

whole. It assesses its genre and characteristic codes of expression, as well, in order to uncover the predominant perspectives it offers. Finally, the initial guess leads to an assessment of the multiple layers of meaning in a work among its possible readings.

The preceding chapter attempted such a guess about the structure and focus of "Tell Me a Riddle," with a reading that explores its major themes and emphases, its plot, characters, and setting as story, and its potential for interpretation. According to Ricoeur, the next step in analysis is validation-explanation, a test of that initial guess which has been necessarily subjective because based on the personal and cultural biases which the reader brings to the text--that is, by the hermeneutic circle[30]--in the form of vocabulary and concepts that lead to a "self-conformability of analysis" (79). By contrast, validation through the process E. D. Hirsch calls "a logic of subjective probability,"[31] ranks, from among the range of constructions posed by the guess, certain interpretations as, tentatively, "more valid" than others (79). Then, having made these judgments, the critical task goes on to their explanation by examining the structure of the work, apart from its original intention or historical reference, to trace its "narrative logic" (85). It is to this twofold task of validation-explanation that this analysis now turns in order to search for "what else we do not hear" (114).

In an effort to understand Tillie Olsen's title story, I have chosen to apply the logic of subjective probability to the author's identified rhetorical devices--repetition and refrain, catalogue and ellipsis, contrast and contradiction--and to her predominant metaphors and symbols as clues to a "more valid" reading of the underlying structure of the work, further tested by means of its narrative logic. Ricoeur's final stage of analysis--understanding as comprehension--will also be explored in this and later chapters of the study.

Repetition and Refrain: Immediacy and Presence "Bringing Time To Mind"

In *A Search for God in Time and Memory*, John S. Dunne, Professor of Theology at the University of Notre Dame, analyzes the function of repetition in modern religious thought as a tool for understanding by comparing it to St. Augustine's use of recollection as learning. He observes that Augustine first adopted the Manichean belief that understanding derives from the

recollection of a former existence in the world of light, and in the passing on of the soul from generation to generation; later moved to its counterpart in Neoplatonism's belief in remembering truths learned in a former existence in the world of ideas; and, finally (in disbelief over the preexistence of soul), "found recollection put him in touch, instead, with the nothingness from which he came" (56). Thus Augustine, carrying recollection beyond most autobiographical accounts, found the nothingness out of which he came the same nothingness out of which the world was created; and, in recollecting it, he found himself in some real sense contemporaneous with the beginning of time (56-57).

Dunne observes further that Kierkegaard believed repetition the modern counterpart of the Greeks' notion of recollection as the source of all knowledge, that is, that the whole of life is repetition (57). As with Freud, who believed the compulsion to repeat was for the purpose of "assimilation of those primordial experiences that were so mysterious to the human being when he first underwent them," so Kierkegaard thought of repetition as the appropriation "of [an] original relationship on a higher level" (60). For both, "repetition itself would be the turning of the wheel; the forward movement of the vehicle would be the assimilation or appropriation that is taking place" (60).[32] Dunne contends modern thought conceives such movement in every dimension:

> To move from the immediate level, where one's concerns are confined to the immediate situation, to the existential level, where they are extended to one's past and future, is to appropriate one's own life or lifetime. To move from the existential level to the historic level, where one's concerns are extended to the past and future of mankind, is to appropriate one's times and all history. The whole process of "bringing time to mind" . . . has this structure of repetition and appropriation. (60-61)

Dunne sees this view of life in contrast to linear progress--running a course or moving toward a goal--as a process of becoming, through repetition, what one is potentially, one's fundamental identity, incorporating the many roles and identities assumed in a lifetime, and in the on-going time of life, past and present (61). Dunne describes the experience as "appropriating the creative power that could draw being out of nothingness . . . of becoming and of the orientation that

becoming has from nothingness toward being" (67). Furthermore, "[t]he difference between one phase of life and another, for a modern man," according to Dunne, "would be a difference of modality, a difference in the degree or manner in which the content is appropriated" (60).

Whether such an analysis of growth and learning is sufficiently inclusive, I believe Tillie Olsen's use of repetition has this character; that is, in contrast to learning as linear journey or ladder of experience, her "understanding" is more akin to the meditative appropriation of what one is, immediately and historically, of "what is there, and we do not hear" (114). The old woman declares, after her description of the "torrent" of childbearing and nourishing, and of its aftermath as "desert": "Not there would she dwell, a memoried wraith. Surely that was not all, surely there was more. Still the springs, the springs were in her seeking. Somewhere an older power that beat for life. Somewhere coherence, transport, meaning" (93). In this passage the old woman describes her sense that, like the "love--the passion of tending--[that] had risen with the need" in child-bearing (92), other springs of creativity arise to meet other needs within her, this time, perhaps, for expression of a deeper or more inclusive meaning, of the kind that art and music touch.

The refrains and iterated words in "Tell Me a Riddle" are the means whereby repetition achieves and conveys such deepening understanding of what is, such appropriation, as traced through their variations and changes.[33] For example, as the family discusses the move to the Haven, key phrases of the first section of the story--not to "move to the rhythms of others" and to have "won to a reconciled peace" (76-77)--are introduced, with reference to the old woman's welcome of "solitude," followed by her plea, "I can no longer live between people" (85). Then the phraseology changes as the old woman, already travelling, wishes "they would but leave her in the air now still of clamor, in the reconciled solitude, to journey to her self" (93). The replacement of "peace" with "solitude" suggests the change occurring in Section Two, not only in her circumstances, but also in her self-concept--from the simple need for withdrawal from activities and demands, in themselves, to the positive redirection and use of her growing capacities "to understand" the experiences of her lifetime. The phrases then disappear altogether (except for their echo in Jeannie's description of "'the peace, the serenity that breathed'" [116]) as the old woman actively appropriates that "journey to her self" in Sections Three and Four.

As the "reconciled peace" becomes the more deliberative, more expressive "solitude," a series of other repetitions take their place, particularly the words "betrayer," "betrayal," and "coil." After a first reference, at Vivi's, from the old woman's recall of violence--"Lisa, the gentle and tender, biting at the betrayer's jugular" (99)--and a second on the visit to Max and Rose--"the old habit betraying of parading the queerness of her" (104)--betrayal reaches its most intense expression in Lisa: "killed one who betrayed many. Because of betrayal, betrayed all she lived and believed" (113-14). Finally, it reappears, this time as basic to the old couple's relationship, in their mutual accusations: "'Weakling . . . Betrayer. All your life you have run'" (115) and "the bereavement and betrayal he had sheltered--compounded through the years--hidden even from himself" (120). Appropriation of the concept here is at its deepest, from its initial use to explain Lisa's violent retaliation against an informer, and its identification with the old man's belittling humor, to its ironic use in the descriptions both of Lisa's motive and of her murderous action, and of the old couple's reciprocal attitudes and retaliations in the most intimate relationship of life. Later the old man accuses Eva again, this time of employing "betrayed words" as she extols the now defunct beliefs of their youth. Finally, at the turning point of the old man's encounter with his own solitude, he clutches Jeannie's sketch--"as if it could shield against the monstrous shapes of loss, of betrayal, of death" (124)--in a reference to the threat of ultimate betrayal.

Similarly, "she curled to him, he coiled to her" appears early in a reference to their "old harmonies and dependencies" (83); reappears in the description of Jeannie's sketch in which the old woman is "coiled, convoluted like an ear" (111)--a synecdoche for the deepening of total attentiveness; and then reverses with startling force in images of retaliation. In the likeness of a slithering, "swaying, propped" and hissing snake, the old woman resists being packed off to the hospital, and, although the term "coiled" is not used, it is evoked, nonetheless (115), only to reappear when the old man compares her memory to a "hidden tape recorder . . . coiled infinite mile on mile . . . that maliciously she was playing back" (118). Finally, "the bereavement and betrayal he had sheltered . . . [are] uncoiled, released, *sprung*" along with "the monstrous shapes of what had actually happened in the century" (120), as the old man's struggle to evade reality has run its course. In fact, the term itself seems to coil and uncoil throughout the work, used

both to predict and to set loose the major turning points of the story, as it is reflected, also, in the structure of many passages that themselves coil and uncoil, from refrain to refrain (89-91, 98-100). A last image of the coil, redeemed and then violated again, occurs during their final encounter when the reference to the "crown of braids shorn" (123) both puts David in touch again with his deep love for Eva and confronts him with "the monstrous shapes of loss" (124).

Other phrases, that link initial with later emotions expressed in the story, refer to the symptoms of the old woman's disease: "And the long shudder begins, and the sweat beads on her forehead" (91). The description first appears as she arrives at Vivi's and rejects contact with the baby; repeats, with variation, after her memory of "the passion of tending"--"the shudder seized her again, and the sweat" (93); and recurs and intensifies, in reverse order, at the end of the series of memories that make up the visit: "And the sweat beads, and the long shudder seizes" (100). Later, noticing the "grey sweat on her face," the old man softens toward her annoying disruption at the concert as he senses the long shudder has begun (106). Finally, the old woman's rehearsal of heroic lines from her favorite quotations is interrupted--"(blur of a shudder)"--with her deepening delirium (119).

In addition to words and phrases, whole scenes repeat throughout the story, changing and developing with each reappearance out of a new context. Two, in particular, provide both structural and thematic frames for the story: the episode in the Siberian prison and the scene on the road outside Olshana. It is the old man who first refers to the prison sequence when he scorns his wife's uncharacteristic request that he stay with her: "It doesn't seem so good the time of solitary when she was a girl exile in Siberia" (83). The terms "solitary," "solitude," and "solitaire" elicit shades of meaning in the story--the first a reference to a forced confinement, alone and silent; the second, to a creative aloneness (developed later); and the third, to a game played to please oneself, and perhaps to kill time. The meaning of "solitary" in the Siberian setting is clearly the first--abandonment.

The old man's initial reference to his wife's role as orator in the 1905 revolution follows her attack on Hannah's religious practices (90) and reveals the grounds for her exile, later confirmed in the conversation with Max and Rose: ". . . Russia fifty-six years ago . . . *hunger; secret meetings; human rights; spies; betrayals; prison; escape. . .*" (104). But the most focused

allusions come, first, in the free associations made with the round windows of the old couple's plane ride--"Eye round--like the smaller window that framed distance the solitary year of exile when only her eyes could travel, and no voice spoke. And the polar winds hurled themselves across snows trackless and endless and white. . ." (92). The image suggests being silenced and closed in, "solitary," like the earth under the cloud-cover beneath the plane. Second, induced by screaming in the house beyond, memories return as the old woman, having retreated to her granddaughters' bedroom and imagines "David, who with a stone slew, . . . the common room of the prison . . . and the informer being brought in, a prisoner now, like themselves. And Lisa leaping, yes, Lisa, the gentle and tender, biting at the betrayer's jugular" (99). Thus the foundational experience of betrayal and its conseqences is remembered just before the old couple's second flight, this time to solitariness, solitude, and solitaire in a Los Angeles resort.

But the full story of Lisa as liberator is revealed only in the old woman's dying description, half-whispered, to Lennie and Helen: "'Like Lisa she is, your Jeannie. Have I told you of Lisa who taught me to read?'" (112). The uncharacteristically detailed description that follows ends, finally, the old woman's silent exile, when "no voice spoke" (92), seemingly released by Jeannie, "the lightness and brightness of her like a healing" (102). This passage also exposes, for the first time, what she had to brave as a young girl in order to "ride . . . to books"--her father's beatings, the nights full of howling dogs, the snows of winter--followed by the terrible contradiction in seeing one for whom "life was holy" killing before her eyes in elemental rage. In repeating here, at the end of the story, and of her life, the commitment she made then--"All that happens, one must try to understand" (113)--the political orator, wife, mother, and grandmother reveals also her faithfulness to that on-going and not-yet-resolved struggle. The successive repetitions of these words, phrases, and episodes reflect her deepening awareness of "what else we do not hear," while at the same time they prepare her for her most threatening encounters with betrayal, still to come--first in the lives closest to hers and, finally, in her own life and death.

The second changing and developing episode that is central to the story also frames it externally by appearing in its opening pages as the old woman's earliest memory, and again at the close as her final promise. In one of the story's first incidents, the old man belittles her,

"When you were four years old, . . . you scratched in your dirt with the chickens and thought Olshana was the world" (79). The scene recurs briefly as part of her reverie on the plane--"(The round thatched roofs of Olshana.)"--and in her memories of playing jacks in her village--with seven stones, "round and flat" (92, 99). But it is developed most fully in her vision at the concert hall where, as the singing mounts: "from floor to balcony to dome a bare-footed sore-covered little girl threaded the sound- thronged tumult, danced her ecstasy of grimace to flutes that scratched at a cross-roads village wedding" (106). And as she later tells "Jeannie . . . yes, Jeannie . . . yes, Jeannie, they danced, and for all the bodies they had they might as well be chickens, and indeed, they scratched and flapped their arms and hopped" (113). The changing image in these sequences moves--from the earliest "scratched . . . with the chickens" to "danced . . . to flutes that scratched at a . . . wedding" to "might as well be chickens [as they] scratched and flapped . . . and hopped"--as does the focus--from the deprivation of poverty toward an expression of liberation. But artistic truth blocks the child and her village from escaping their earth-bound deprivation. That possibility, "at a cross-roads," arises only in the closing promise, made to Jeannie, that "[o]n the last day . . . she would go back . . .when she first heard music . . . the road of the village . . . a wedding . . . dance . . . flutes so joyous . . . tremble in the air" (125). The image of liberation is left, finally, to "promise"--her own possibility and the world's--as the largest circle drawn around the story closes.

In Augustine, the movement back to the beginning of his life, and of the world's, "from nothingness," brought him into the presence of the creator of all things whom he addresses directly in *The Confessions.* "You have made us for yourself and our hearts are restless until they rest in You" (1:1).[34] "Tell Me a Riddle" also evokes a sense of presence, not only of being, but also of standing before a listening ear, as a potential unifying image. The first story in the collection actually ends with a petition--"Only help her know--help make it so there is cause for her to know. . . ." (21)--though the addressee is left unnamed; but the title story elicits this sense of active questioning by other means, primarily in its refrains and repetitions and recurring episodes and images. Familiar to study of questions fundamental to both sacred and secular traditions--rabbinic, Socratic, and scientific (at the theoretical level)--the effect is of tentative enquiry into ambiguous reality, as if testing: "Do I have it right? Is this how it was? Is this the

whole of it? Is there not more?" And there always remains more. The riddle is never solved, but repetitiveness has "moved the wheel forward," as it has also deepened its associations for the old woman--and for the reader. The method here is circling, spiralling, returning to the impact of the concept or the scene, in much the same way that religious liturgy cultivates and reenforces insight within the worshipper over time for the more profound appropriation of the faith. However, Olsen's polyphonic repetitions, overlapping with variations of sound and sense, are only one clue to the interpretation of her text.

Catalogue and Ellipsis: Solitude and Voice--The Life Story

The second pair of rhetorical techniques that shape the reader's sense of the story are the cataloguing of actions and impressions, in order to emphasize their extent and variety, combined with elliptical phrases that suggest the impossibility of finally encompassing their scope.[35] One of the most compelling catalogues in "Tell Me a Riddle" is the old woman's description of nurturing an infant--"the turning maze; the long drunkenness; the drowning into needing . . ."--and of its subsequent reversal--"the painful damming back and drying up of what still surged, but had nowhere to go" (92-93). These passages surround her more abstract and, for a mother, contradictory vision--"other springs in her seeking,"--in reference to another creativity, that of artistic interpretation. But whether cataloguing immediate impressions, or elements of a life journey or of overall human experience, Olsen's attempt at inclusiveness, contrasted with its interruption in ellipsis--"Not that way. Not there, not now could she, not yet. . . ." (93)--leaves the reader with a sense both for the fulness of reality and for its inexhaustibility. And the combination of on-going refrains unfulfilled, and of catalogues that open rather than merely define possibilities, lends the work its voice--that of an insistent, even breathless seeking and questioning: *telling* the riddle. The old woman's "reconciled peace" at the opening of the work and her desire for solitude as withdrawal, are reversed when "the journey to her self" begins and when both peace and the Haven are abandoned for a more strenuous and, at the same time, a more subtle search. The result is a different "solitude," not the absence of activity or of actors, but a new awareness of being alone with one's own, and the world's incompleteness--and promise.

Jerry Irish, a contemporary theologian and teacher, writing on the childhood deaths of two of his sons, defines his loss as confrontation with aloneness that can become creative solitude. He observes that death "can be the end of *a pilgrimage* if we choose a way to travel" (47), but that the choosing itself depends upon our recognizing the reality of our own death (emphasis mine). The risk, however, is that the loneliness at the heart of this recognition (whenever it comes in life) carry with it only rejection, separation, premature death--in short, the burden of our individuality and its barriers to all communication. Paul Ricoeur refers to a similar reality when he acknowledges that "the fundamental solitude of one human being and the isolation of his/her experience are private and non-transferrable, as such, to another" (15).

Irish, in his book, *A Boy Thirteen: Reflections on Death*, uses Paul Tillich's study in *The Eternal Now* to define solitude as "the appropriation of aloneness in the face of death" and asserts that the acceptance of aloneness is also the discovery that we are free (48). The other side of death "as abandonment and separation is . . . living as self-discovery and relation" (49)--that is, realizing that "our death [can] be on behalf of life." Martyrdom, the extreme of such a decision, is "to give up life in overcoming death . . . [or] to make one's own death an act of life" (50). For Irish, "to face the death of another . . . is to face our own death" and carries the possibility of discovering that "we are free to love, free to appropriate our own death as a daily act of life . . . in bringing reconciliation to the alienated and hope to the grieving." In doing so, he asserts, we also "overcome these things in ourselves." He ends his reflections about aloneness-turned-to-solitude with a definition: "Life against death--such a 'living for' is love. . . . Death is ending and loss. Love is beginning and gain. Death is separation. Love is reunion. Death is radical change; so too is love. But whereas death destroys, love creates" (51). Therefore, overwhelmed by life's potential, and without assurance of its end or goal, our freedom to choose how to use our own death, daily, is also the option for creativity out of nothingness and, according to Irish, ultimately for love.[36]

If repetition and refrain work to bring Olsen's questions into sharper and deeper focus, the cataloguing and ellipses suggest the impossibility of completing the story or answering its riddle. But the repetitions also suggest persistent faithfulness to its questions, to possible creativity "out of nothingness"; and the catalogues and interruptions, rich choices and openness

to new possibilities and interpretations, including willingness to change, and, through accepting our own death, to love. The old man, guided by his granddaughter and his wife, is offered this persistence and these possibilities.

Contrast and Contradiction: The Context

The variation in repetitions and the interruption of catalogues in the story combine with a third strategy and further clue to the story's direction--that of contrasts becoming contradictions that lead, finally, to reversals (if not always to their classical complement, recognition). First, the iteration of words and phrases already examined offers this double and doubling-back vision --for example, the wish "not to move to the rhythms of others" and to seek "a reconciled peace" in contrast to the more active solitude, or aloneness, as a source for learning and action. Perhaps the most concrete images for such contrasts, which finally contradict the old woman's original desire and reverse its direction, begin with "the hearing aid turned down" (73):

> Being able at last to live within, and not to move to the rhythm of others, as life had helped her to: denying; removing; isolating; taking the children one by one; then deafening, half-blinding--and at last, presenting her solitude.
>
> And in it she has won to a reconciled peace. (77)

In this circumstance, her chief weapon against the old man's "constant campaign: Sell the house and move to the Haven" (77-78), against the television's blare and "the tumult in her or outside," is "Snap," to turn off the sound of her "ear button, so she would not have to hear" (75). "'All my life around babblers. Enough!'" (82). But listening moves both beyond and deeper within her as, in the midst of life at Vivi's home, she retreats but cannot escape:

> For it seemed to her the crowded noisy house was listening to her, listening for her. She could feel it like a great ear pressed under her heart. And everyting knocked: quick constant raps: let me in, let me in.
>
> How was it that soft reaching tendrils also became blows that knocked? (95)

As the visit lengthens, she both hears and feels the knocking and attempts to "painfully sheathe against the listening house, the tendrils and noises that knocked" (98). Later, when she turns off her hearing aid at the auditorium, however, "the savage zest of their singing came

voicelessly soft and distant, the faces still roared" and remained with her at Mrs. Mays' apartment as "the weight, the soft distant roaring of humanity" (108). Eventually, it is she who embodies the very image of attentiveness--"coiled, convoluted like an ear . . . in her attitude of listening" (111)--and who recognizes "the music [that] knocks, and our poor ears too weak," in a reversal and an active appropriation of both the terms and the ideas she has previously tried to silence, or to simply endure. For her there occurs no "shield against the monstrous shapes. . . ."

In another series of images, this time of speaking, the 1905 orator goes into exile where "no voice spoke" (92), and later, facing another exile, "with frightened eyes watched from mouth to mouth" as her children discussed the Haven (84), or "strained to hear" as her grandchildren discussed "Disaster" (90). But, finally, from "her stubborn silence or the bile 'like a Niagara'" (84), she becomes "Mrs. Babbler": one "who in her life had spoken seldom . . . (never having learned the easy social uses of words), now in dying, spoke incessantly" (112). Recapturing echoes of her original "voice of eloquence that spoke their holiest dreams" (119), she plays back what she had hidden in "a swarm of sounds" (118)--"stained words that on her working lips came stainless" (122).

Having long tried to set aside, in a "reconciled peace," words and the babblers that invaded, along with the demands to listen and to work, the old woman, in dying, becomes both ear and words that work--a communicator--and she is heard. From "the music . . . we do not hear" that plays on her phonograph, she sings instead, "And every life shall be a song" (120) that issues from her own lips. The synergy of sound and sight, thought and feeling, in these passages that develop out of her story finally overwhelms the old woman's "reconciled peace" with the demand to be heard, seen, and felt as she herself changes from withdrawn victim, not only to a listening ear, but also to a song itself.

In another contrast/contradiction that becomes a reversal, roots that normally function to feed instead "swelled . . . split . . . and the tearing shook . . ." (72); tendrils "became blows that knocked" (95); and the nurturing woman, "to none tended or gave food--and could not touch the baby" (94). From the "passion of tending" (92) she becomes "a desert," approaching the end of her life with "a ravening inside" (79), fed from "the tall hooked pillar that held the solutions . . . to feed her veins" (116). She herself hungers, and the children she nourished come, neither to

feed her nor to listen, but to tell her "I do not know you, Mother. Mother, I never knew you. . . . Mother who taught me to mother myself" (116-17). And, in spite of "the springs . . . in her seeking" (93), the old man will beg the doctor at the last "to be merciful, to stop the feeding solutions, to let her die, and with her their youth of belief" (123). From constancy in nourishing to indifference toward food, from protector against suffering to victim of pain, the old woman's roles contrast, and are finally contradictory in the story. But ultimately their significance is also reversed. In Jeannie's sketch ". . . the hospital bed, with her; the double bed alongside, with him; the tall pillar feeding into her veins, and their hands, his and hers, clasped, feeding each other" (124). It is this image--of their unwitting mutuality--that offers the old man a "shield against the monstrous shapes of loss, of betrayal, of death" (124).

The repetition of single words is also used in contrast and contradiction, depending upon their context. Just as the old woman's "peace" and "solitude" as withdrawal become a solitude that is anything but "reconciled" in her terrible contention with vulnerability and abandonment, so also "betrayal" appears in such contrasting contexts as the bloody murder scene--"the betrayer's jugular" (99)--and the old man's public mockery--"the old habit betraying of parading the queerness of her for laughter" (104). But when the tensions between the old couple reach their limit, "Betrayer" (115) and "betrayal" (120) are the mutual accusations with which each confronts the other, so that each hears his or her accusation from the lips of the other--in contradiction. Further, the closing pages reveal that even words are the victims of betrayal--the idealistic "bright, betrayed words" of the hymn (122)--as history itself becomes the perpetrator of "the monstrous shapes of what had actually happened in the century" (120). In fact, David and Eva, mutually accused betrayers, are finally united, not only in their victimizing of one another, but also by their shared vulnerability and loss as life itself fails them, and history is seen to have destroyed their dreams. Reversal, on the other hand, is left for David to experience alone.

The "coil" also winds and unwinds in "Tell Me a Riddle"--most significantly as the old woman's memories unravel, but also in gentler images of mutual dependency--"she curled to him, or he coiled to her" (83); in the "coiled, convoluted . . . ear" (111); and in "the crown of braids which becomes "'not look my hair where they cut. . .'" (123). Furthermore, the whole story coils and uncoils, from immediate experience to biography to history and in reverse,

exposing each of them as participant in the destruction of a relationship: "'All your life you have run'" (115) and "hidden a tape recorder . . . that maliciously she was playing back" (118). Thus the benign, even beautiful coiling turns venomous with her slithering, swaying hiss--"'Coward'" (115)--and his "bereavement and betrayal . . . uncoiled, released, *sprung"* (120). Finally, however, the old man also comes round again in his lonely vigil, triggered to compassion by the memory of a crown of braids.

The episodes repeated throughout the story also recur with contradictory difference. The old woman's early exile in a Siberian prison is first of all a target for the old man's sarcasm as he fights his wife's stubborn resistance to the Haven. "'It doesn't seem so good the time of solitary'" (83) is confirmed later in the conversation with Max and Rose: ". . . *spies, betrayals, prisons* . . ." (104), but only begins to take shape in the references to "the smaller window that framed distance the solitary year of exile when only her eyes could travel, and no voice spoke . . . across snows trackless and endless and white" (92). Her solitary confinement, and the gruesome murder she remembers, later, at Vivi's house--"in the common room of the prison, the sun motes dancing in the shafts of light . . . Lisa leaping, yes, Lisa, the gentle and tender"--confirm the horrific event which was her Siberian imprisonment. When eventually she compares Lisa to Jeannie, she confirms the earlier "gentle and tender" while the intimacy of detail signifies its impact on the old woman's life; for, though the snows of winter also recur in this final account that catalogues further "terrible dogs" and her father's beatings, still she rides to the Tolstoyan--"like a lady, to books--for whom "life was holy, knowledge was holy," and who taught her to read (112). That Lisa also "killed one who betrayed many" establishes the contrasting roles and contradictory acts perpetuated by those the old woman loves most, as it also confirms her courageous survival of violence, of deprivation, and of betrayal, even by them. "To understand" is her avowed commitment, but the relationships within her domestic life have tried her persistence and limited her self-realization. So the contrasting and contradictory values in the most formative events of her early memory, which prepared her for faithful nurture of their children and for shared ideals with her spouse, have led instead, and with eerie consistency, to resentments and violent struggle. Under the haloed lamp "with the beaded fringe" she read with her children the Book of the Martyrs, but it was only "[w]hat I intended and did not" (97); for

"trying to understand why" (112) is not enough to reconcile perpetration of violence with the commitment to oppose it. Still, "life may be hated or wearied of, but never despised" (113); therefore, having found her voice, she tells her story. And, though the old man resists hearing, ironically it will be he who finally accepts, with Jeannie's help, "reconciled solitude" in the work's major reversal.

Last, the extended frame of "Tell Me a Riddle" is the image of the little girl who "scratched in [the] dirt with the chickens" (79), "danced her ecstacy of grimace to flutes that scratched" (106), and with whom others danced who, "for all the bodies they had . . . might as well be chickens . . . scratched and flapped . . . and hopped" (113). The interchange of descriptions in these recurring and changing phrases contrasts and contradicts human and animal music and dance, reversing only in the final liberated vision, which is also the story's "promise": that the old woman will return "to when she first heard music . . . on the road. . . . It is a wedding and they dance, while flutes so joyous and vibrant tremble in the air" (125). Whether this ultimate reversal ever occurs, we are left to wonder.

What is good for him is not for her--"'There is no help, my children. Different things we need'" (85)--but eventually the old woman tells her story, and the old man hears it. He "gently tend[s] with knotty fingers as Jeannie had taught," and "her hand crawl[s] across the covers for his" (122). Thus the rhetorical strategies that form "Tell Me a Riddle" suggest that questions repeat and grow in their complex variety, never completely "remembered, sifted, weighed, estimated, nor totaled" (10), but always recurring in contrast and contradiction. Finally, confounded by reversals, the choice remains: whether to reject or to recognize, to run or to "'come back and help. . .'" (125).

Metaphor and Symbol: Surplus of Meaning Beyond Reversals

In his discussion of metaphor and symbol in the third chapter of *Interpretation Theory*, Paul Ricoeur observes: "If we incorporate the surplus of meaning of metaphors into the domain of semantics, then we are able to give the theory of signification its greatest possible extension" (45). Ricoeur uses metaphor "as the touchstone of the cognitive value of literary works" (45), or of works that say more than they mean, and proposes that literary texts develop through a play

on the meanings within them, or on "the use of discourse where several things are specified at the same time and where the reader is not required to choose among them" (47). Such productive use of ambiguity expands or stretches meaning and, with it, the grasp of experience to which it refers.

Citing I. A. Richards' analysis in his *The Philosophy of Rhetoric*, Ricoeur examines metaphor as the most focused example of semantic ambiguity, a figure that produces creative variations in meaning (the function of tropes). Richards claims the creative tension in metaphors arises not from the substitution of one term for another--a figurative for a literal meaning--but between two interpretations of an entire utterance. Ricoeur explains:

> Thus a metaphor does not exist in itself, but in and through an interpretation. The metaphorical interpretation presupposes a literal interpretation which self-destructs in a significant contradiction. It is this process of self-destruction or transformation which imposes a sort of twist on the words, an extension of meaning thanks to which we can make sense where a literal interpretation would be literally nonsensical. (50)

Ricoeur illustrates: "When the poet speaks of a 'blue angelus,' or a 'mantle of sorrow,' . . . [t]he angelus is not blue, if blue is a color; sorrow is not a mantle, if the mantle is a garment made of cloth" (50). And the metaphor is, therefore, not a word, but the entire utterance, for it is the presumption of kinship between unlikes that serves to reduce the shock engendered by the two incompatibles so that, through the calculated error, the metaphor becomes "invention within which the response to the discordance in the sentence is a new extension of meaning" (52). It is as if, through the classic association of unlikes, the two oppositions in the comparison "catch" something of one another's incompatible quality and, within the proximity of their limited similarity, and the resulting claim on one another, nag, tease, and taunt the resulting tension into a larger comprehension. Accordingly, "a metaphor is not an ornament of discourse. It has more than an emotive value because it offers new information. A metaphor, in short, tells us something new about reality" (52-53).

By extension, Ricoeur claims that the basic metaphor of heuristic fiction (the "mythos" or hypothetical situation, such as the plot in an Olsen story) becomes a model or means for a shift

away from thinking in the already available codes of a convention or culture to "a new way of being in the world," an as-yet-unfamiliar possibility waiting to be searched out (seen, heard, touched) as a new and a more productive subject for "mimesis." In turn, according to his analysis, interpretation is helped in its search for understanding by a reading of the "narrative logic," the objective structure--or how the story "works"--which can give a clue to its basic metaphor (85). For art proceeds by the process of "aesthetic augmentation" to isolate from the surrounding blur of undifferentiated experience a set of minimal signs which then enhance the trait or tale on which it focuses, surrounding it, also for purposes of concentration and enhancement, with absence (41-42). It is through the appropriation of this "logic" that comprehension (or the third stage of understanding-interpretation) develops and Ricoeur's theory of interpretation reaches completion.

The struggle to perceive and interpret metaphor, therefore, is related to understanding whole texts--cut off by inscription, in so-called "semantic autonomy," from their originary intention and audience--or, as in anthropology, to appreciating another culture and its unfamiliar codes. Thus interpretation becomes, for Ricoeur, the attempt to make estrangement and distanciation (of writing from writer and original context) productive, that is to bridge the gap and "rescue" what would otherwise be lost, by making one's own what was previously foreign (89-91). This process takes place for Ricoeur, not through Romanticism's empathy for the writer, as in expressive criticism which psychologizes the text as an expression of its originating intention, nor through the historicist's study, in affective or didactic evaluation, of the originary audience and of the situation that shaped the work. (Enquiry into both intention and effect is instead incorporated into the larger process of "readings" already outlined as initial guess and validation/explanation.) Rather, for the purposes of investigation, understanding the function of metaphor within a work becomes crucial to revealing its underlying structure, or paradigms, that will, in turn, facilitate the reader's appropriation of the work in his or her own circumstance, that is, within the reader's comprehension. Ricoeur claims that Levi-Strauss assigns to such structural analysis the function of "making men aware of certain oppositions and of tending toward their progressive mediation." He continues: "To eliminate this reference to the aporias of existence around which mythic thought gravitates would be to reduce the theory of myth to the

necrology of meaningless discourses of mankind" (87). Thus an analysis of rhetorical strategies within "Tell Me a Riddle," and of their functions in the logic of the narrative, is an effort to understand the so-called "sameness of the sense in the infinite series of its mental actualizations," among however many readers it finds itself an audience (90). A consideration of Tillie Olsen's use of metaphor and symbol, in an attempt to discover the underlying logic (or explanation) in her fiction, will conclude this "second reading" of the text.

That "Tell Me a Riddle" begins with an old couple's "deep back . . . stubborn, gnarled roots of a quarrel . . . now swelled up visible [that] split the earth between them" (72) and ends as "flutes so joyous and vibrant tremble in the air" (125) reveals the author's both deep-rooted and vibrant connection with the power of metaphor. According to Ricoeur, in fact, symbols, which are also the bearers of double meaning ("it now seems to me . . . something non-semantic as well as something semantic" [45]), call on the work of metaphors to reveal relationship between apparently unrelated, even contradictory ideas:

> But there is more in the symbol than in the metaphor. Metaphor is just the linguistic procedure--that bizarre form of predication--within which the symbolic power is deposited. The symbol remains a two-dimensional phenomenon to the extent that the semantic face refers back to the non-semantic one. The symbol is bound in a way that the metaphor is not. Symbols have roots. Symbols plunge us into the shadowy experience of power. Metaphors . . . owe their power to relate the semantic surface to the pre-semantic surface in the depths of human experience to the two-dimensional structure of the symbol. (69)

Tillie Olsen's alternating use of metaphor and symbol in fact enacts Ricoeur's analytic theory.

Metaphorical thinking, and its reliance upon symbols for its selectivity and direction, is everywhere in "Tell Me a Riddle." Beginning with terms, images, and episodes already examined in the previous sections--solitude, coils, and betrayals, the person of Lisa and the vision on the road--all can be seen to lead to more fundamental sources for her story--in the elements of nature, in the forms of art, and in such figures as circles, hands, and, finally, the child. By tracing the use of these tropes, as Ricoeur defines them--"turns" on the naming and meaning of experience (18)--one can learn how Tillie Olsen has responded to the call of symbols

for metaphors to work on organizing and relating the welter of experienced sensations into a perceptible order. Finally, this analysis will end with the old couple--and the assurance that all the old woman heard in the music, "the ordered sounds and the struggling" (77), still continues.

The "reconciled peace" the old woman lays claim to from the opening of the story means, first of all, a negation--"never again to be forced to move to the rhythm of others" (76)--but, as noted earlier, soon takes on another connotation, that of solitude: *solus*, alone, "able at last to live within" (77). But this reconciliation, or reuniting with one's self, will be hard-won, as she abandons acquiescence to "that in her which never lived" (117)--"unused the life" (108)--and begins "to journey to her self" (93). She searches back from immediate circumstances through a lifetime and into their primordial beginnings out of fire and rock and water into air. To be reconciled (reunited) in this sense will be to move from the earth-splitting quarrel of her daily existence down into the explosive, fluid, breath-taking and renewing cycles that formed it, searching the beginning for some clue to its resolution. In the process, the elemental symbols of existence, as Tillie Olsen draws upon them--from the fire-jetting, rock-layering, crucible of the centuries" (99) through evolution "toward the shore that nurtured life" (103) and out into the "determining and crucial" air (92)--resonate with and parallel the human struggle to bring form out of chaos which it is art's function, in turn, to attempt to communicate.

According to a related chain of images, life issues in a metaphorical tape, uncoiling, imprinting, and winding up again on a thickening reel that *does* "hold the fossil memory." Another kind of unrolling thaws the "black glass," and "the heart of stone" turns to flesh, which then must struggle through "eternal labor, freedom, labor . . . (stone will perish but the [human] word remain)" (99). And like the coiled snake that strikes (115), or the betrayal "uncoiled, released, *sprung*," the tape suddenly reverses, plays back, and, from its concentric circles, reveals the vulnerable, long "hidden even from himself . . . monstrous shapes of what had actually happened. . ." (120-21). Again, though human discourse and "the word" prevail, threat of destruction remains also in the "great rock fought to heights [that] crashed back down," and in the lyrical psalmist, David, who "with a stone slew, screaming. . . " (99).

As the old woman traces evolution further, from insensate eruptions to human turmoil, "screaming" releases the memory of "sun motes dancing [and] Lisa leaping . . . biting . . .,"

moves on through "Paul and Sammy's terrible fights," and ends in "[b]lows, screams, a call: 'Grandma!' For her? Oh please not for her" (99). In the space of one short passage, Tillie Olsen has taken the reader through a portrayal of creation and the fall of the cosmos as represented in myth, in biography, and among the children in the house. The old grandmother recognizes "the call" for support and the claim of a shared secret. In her closet retreat, where it has "helped to braid and unbraid the sashes that dangled, or to trace the pattern on the hoop slips" (98), she gives witness to "[t]he crown of braids shorn" again. She who identifies the primordial scream with David's, her children's and her grandchildren's, is not after all so withdrawn or confused. Ricoeur describes how networks of metaphors engender

> . . . what we can call root metaphors, metaphors which, on the one hand, have the power to bring together the partial metaphors borrowed from the diverse fields of our experience and thereby to assure them a kind of equilibrium. On the other hand, they have the ability to engender a conceptual level. Root metaphors assemble and scatter. They assemble subordinate images together, and they scatter concepts at a higher level. They are the dominant metaphors capable of both engendering and organizating [sic] a network that serves as a junction between the symbolic level with its slow evolution and the more volatile metaphorical [that is, fully articulated] level. (64)

In Tillie Olsen, the gathering and scattering of rock, water, and fire; of screams and leaps; of coils, ears, and snakes invokes deeper symbolic patterns.

Ricoeur observes further that "certain fundamental human experiences make up an immediate symbolism that presides over the most primitive metaphorical order" and claims that "[t]his originary symbolism seems to adhere to the most immutable human manner of being in the world" (65). He sees such systems of symbols as "a reservoir of meaning whose metaphorical [that is, semantically expressed] potential is yet to be spoken." It is this reservoir that seems to call for the work of "the most insistent metaphors [that] hold fast to the intertwining of the symbolic infrastructure and the metaphoric superstructure" (65). In literature he sees such chains and hierarchies of metaphor, though still simply semantic innovations, taking on some of

the power and immutability that characterizes symbols with their power to disclose yet unthought concepts and connections.

In the passages just examined, symbolic forms have reached metaphorical utterance, both assembled and scattered. Stone and circle, with their unarticulated roots in the mystery of eternal dimensions, are given expression in the chains of specific reference Tillie Olsen organizes and categorizes. According to Ricoeur, "the symbol assimilates rather than apprehends a resemblance . . . [and] in assimilating some things to others it assimilates us to what is thereby signified. . . . All the boundaries are blurred. . ." (56). Tillie Olsen works on that boundary along which "what asks to be brought to language in symbols, but which never passes over completely . . ., is always something powerful, efficacious, forceful" (63). The poem is, Ricoeur contends, "bound by what it creates [as] . . . the reduction of the referential values of ordinary discourse is the negative condition that allows new configurations . . . new ways of being in the world, of living there and of projecting our innermost possibilities onto it . . . [to be] brought to language. . . . And in this sense, no one is more free than the poet . . . [whose] speech is freed from the ordinary vision of the world only because [s]he makes [her]self free for the new being which [s]he has to bring to language" (60). In this sense, Tillie Olsen has stated metaphorically how life has betrayed (reversed and revealed) itself, stored as the account has been in the old woman's memory and restored, finally, in communication to the old man. The coil sprung recalls and evokes the eternal circle; and stone, its primordial beginnings and always threatened end.

I asked Tillie Olsen about the figure of the circle which repeats so insistently throughout the story--in windows and roofs, likened to the shapes of nature:

> . . . steerage ship of memory that shook a great, circular sea . . . in a window round like the airplane's--sun round, moon round. (The round thatched roofs of Olshana.) Eye round--like the smaller window that framed distance the solitary year of exile. . . . (92)

--in elemental bubbles and stone:

> The bubbles just danced while you scrubbed . . . and you stopped to show us how to blow our own bubbles. . . . (97)

--in eyes and ears, some seeing and hearing, some not:

Ann's cardboard dolls with their great ringed questioning eyes. . . . (98)

They look back at her with the eyes of others before them. . . . (101)

. . . coiled, convoluted like an ear. . . . (111)

--in the innocence of the "crown of braids" (123) and "the round table [with its] halo from the lamp" (97), in the tender "coiling of the old couple's night-long embrace" (108), and in the return of martyrdoms, refrains, and incidents through which the story winds.

For it is from the repeated incidents that circle through the story, and upon themselves, that the spin of the metaphorical "twist" finally springs. The story-within-the-story of Lisa, "a Tolstoyan . . . [for whom] life was holy, knowledge was holy," and who taught the child Eva to read, reveals also that she "killed one who betrayed many . . . [and t]hey hung her" (112). In her the microcosm of the tale is embodied--"the highborn . . ., noble in herself" who was also forbidden, but to whom the young Eva rode "in her carriage like a lady, to books . . . [in] one minute . . . killed, before my eyes. . ." (112-13). This tasting of forbidden fruit combined, for Eva, with believing "so beautifully," even in that "world of their youth--dark, ignorant, terrible with hate and disease . . . [still] they had not mistrusted man nor themselves" (122). And the consequences were exile, Lisa's death, and escape to new "labor, freedom, labor" (99) in the long effort at creating and sustaining life that followed, that eventually betrayed her, and before which she finally stood accused of betrayal. In the process, she has become Lisa, and then her informer.

Tillie Olsen's answer to my question about her use of circles was blunt: "I don't plant symbols." But later she commented, "Circles in nature have special resonance for us, as with the old woman and those rounds of her life that was coming to an end." Whether conscious of the process or not, the artist, I believe, in making "herself free for the new being which she has to bring to language," becomes metaphor for the symbols' call to work. Taking what her awareness hears--"the ordered sounds and the struggle"--she assimilates some things to others and herself to what is thereby signified (56), eventually giving it the shape of words in the continuing effort to articulate the riddle. In the process, both symbols and metaphors work on and for one another through the artist as medium. Ricoeur writes:

> There is more in the metaphor than in the symbol [for] . . . it brings to language the implicit semantics of the symbol. What remains confused in the symbol--the assimilation of one thing to another, and of us to things; the endless correspondence between the elements--is clarified in the tension of the metaphorical utterance.
>
> But there is more in the symbol than in the metaphor . . . [which] is just the linguistic procedure . . . within which the symbolic power is deposited. The symbol remains . . . two-dimensional . . . the semantic face refer[ing] back to the non-semantic one . . . bound in a way that the metaphor is not. Symbols have roots [and] plunge us into the shadowy experience of power. Metaphors are just the linguistic surface of symbols, and they owe their power to relate the semantic surface to the presemantic surface in the depths of human experience to the two-dimensional structure of the symbol. (69)

Thus metaphors work to bring to expression the suggestive possibilities that symbols represent. In this sense, the poet--Olsen--is herself a metaphor.

But Tillie Olsen refuses any theorizing or etherealizing of her special form of discourse. She claimed that in our fascination with archetypes and ritual and arcane lore, we "myth" the way we have to understand, trying to explain or condone too quickly, for example, that suffering has a creative purpose.

> I do not accept the view of beauty derived from suffering--in spite of the rush of awe that accompanies such mysteries. I live in the now--with Eva's "the not yet in the now"--and believe that human needs *are* rights. Too much of life's horrors, past and present, did not have to happen. As Virginia Woolf said, "The only thing wrong with privilege is that everyone doesn't have it." Light comes not only out of suffering, but out of children, love, friendship, joy. Much evil arises from circumstances, not inevitability, and the greatest leap of creative imagination is, as Christa Wolf has said, "to be able to discern reality in your time." Out of learning the universe changes; not exalting, but using one's own learning--that is the way to honor, to celebrate life.[37]

Olsen will not condone the aesthetic dissociated from concrete concern for individual or corporate justice.

As further illustration of Olsen's refusal to over-read literary allusions and techniques, my questions about bird imagery were reduced, in her analysis, to her mother-in-law's (Seevya's) experience on a poultry farm with chicken plagues. The deformed birds had to be separated, she said, to protect them from pecking--"'positively Dostoyevskan,' she called it." Similarly, my enquiry about the image of dancing brought a warning not to romanticize it--that it was not the circle-dancing of the Israeli folk tradition that we know, but "largely individual, tired, lousy" efforts at movement by the short of stature, bow-legged, and insect-ridden poor whose long-tradition of poverty is written into their bodies. (In her Arts Center reading she also substituted "festival" for "wedding" in the final reference to Olshana, later explaining that the change was out of respect for a comment by Adrienne Rich who made her conscious of "the compulsory heterosexuality" of our imagery.) However true it is that dancing, seldom a part of their lives, was included at weddings, it is also significant that such religious festivals, often the Jews' only expression of hope, were the chosen occasions for pogrom when the gathered community could be annihilated en masse.[38] (In a similar juxtaposition, the "sun motes danced" just before Lisa's "leap" at the throat of the informer [99].)

In our interview, Tillie Olsen stated further that, among the arts, "music is the one most integral to human life, for lullabies can be sung when you haven't hands enough to pick up the baby." She recalled as well that it was her mother, Genja, who, just before she died, told how she had first heard instrumental music in her village--from flutes that trembled in the air and shone in the sun.

In a reflection of this experience, the final and most inclusive frame of the story is the vision of the child on the road, part human, part animal, scratching with the chickens "in the dirt," hungry and insect-ridden (79). As she dances "her ecstacy of grimace to flutes that scratched" (106), with others who "might as well be chickens . . . scratched and flapped . . . and hopped" (113), still she hears "flutes so joyous and vibrant. . ." (125).

Because of our conversation, I have been disabused of any "rush of awe" over this juxtaposing of beauty and poverty, but I continue to be moved by the suggestion of reversal and

return--the old woman's, the story's, and that of all life. Perhaps the alpha and omega for Tillie Olsen, here and in her other work, is not the teaching function of art, not the serving of human need, as suggested in the introduction to this study, but the child and the tending hands that assure its survival. Dance, song, even the story, communicate when there are not enough hands to help: "Hannah, have I ten hands? . . . How can I give it, Clara, how can I give it when I don't have?" (123). Clara testifies:

> . . . The hands I needed to be for you, the heaviness, the responsibility.
>
> Is this she? Noises the dying make, the crablike hands crawling over the covers. The ethereal singing.
>
> She hears that music, that singing from childhood; forgotten sound--not heard since, since. . . . And the hardness breaks like a cry: Where did we lose each other, first mother, singing mother? (116)

But if the song and the hands go together, is it the hands that are the more fundamental? Or is it the teaching? "Heritage! But when did I have time to teach? Of Hannah I asked only hands to help" (91).

References to hands recur again and again also in "Tell Me a Riddle." All the tending catalogued on its early pages implies the work of hands: ". . . to buy, to shop, to fix, to cook, to wash, to clean" (74). Vivi remembers, "You sang while you sewed," showed us "how to blow our own bubbles with green onion stalks," and "put [the Book of the Martyrs] on the round table and we'd look at it together. . . ." But the old woman queries, "(What I intended and did not? . . .)" for lack of hands enough (97). In addition, in spite of his arthritic hands, the old man, who had "had no peace [from] prying out storm windows" and "fight[ing] to mend vacuums" (74-75), finally "went back, checked her pulse, gently tended with his knotty fingers as Jeannie had taught" and turned her (122). So perhaps they do go together--tending hands and artistic revelation and the child--as embodied in Jeannie's sketch: ". . . and their hands, his and hers, clasped, feeding each other" (124). At the end, with the familiar petition for "Bread, day-old," and "one soup bone," the plea to the children, "don't fight," and the song she sang, "clearly, beautifully," the old woman lays claim once more to "a reconciled peace" that combines feeding, the children, and song (123). We imagine then that she returns to the road, Emmaeus-setting for

what the child hears (she had "thought Olshana was the world" [79])--and that the old man comes back in response to Jeannie's invitation "to help her poor body to die" (125).

The significance of teaching and the child, of art, and of tending hands will become clearer in an analysis of the other stories in the collection, and of Jeannie's role in two of them (and implied, perhaps, in the third)--Jeannie who, in "Tell Me a Riddle," has had the last, or nearly the last, word.

CHAPTER IV

TELL ME A RIDDLE: THE WHOLE WORK

Richard E. Palmer summarizes his study, *Hermeneutics: Interpretation Theory in Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger and Gadamer,* with a series of "Theses on Interpretation." The initial premise of his summarical theses is that method, by which he means analysis that proceeds from fixed categories, is often an attempt to attack-master-control the interpretation process and, in turn, the work of art it addresses. By contrast, the approach developed from the work of the four interpretation theorists of his study is likened to Socratic dialogue which intends to proceed by "dialectical circling and advancing into the subject itself through question and answer." But, according to Palmer,

> [t]here is a great difference between a question asked by the analyst who is merely looking for an answer and sure of his own position, and the real query that arises from self-questioning, from admission of one's own uncertainty. This questioning says: Is it not so that. . . ? This latter is no longer a mere questioning of the "object," but of the "subject." (249)

Thus Palmer's study concludes with emphasis upon trying to understand, not through cross-examination of a work viewed only as an object of study--a method that often results, accordingly, in the work's eluding standard critical categories--but through listening to and hearing its questions as those of a subject that addresses the interpreter's own uncertainty. By this description of interpretation, a work of art becomes an event through which the interpreter encounters a new understanding of the world. To interpret, then, is not to bombard a text with questions in order to *grasp* its meaning, but rather "to understand the question it puts to the reader . . . [from] behind the text . . . that called the text into being. Literary interpretation needs

to develop the dynamics and art of hearing, of listening . . . an openness for creative negativity, for learning something it could not anticipate or foresee" (250).

Such an alternative method, of so-called "open" enquiry, is based upon assumptions concerning the nature of understanding in the light of particular definitions of "history" and "world," and of the linguistic foundation of all perception, that is, of the perceiver as well as of that which is perceived (see pp. 217-26 of present study). Beyond this follow-up on the phenomenologist's view of the historical and linguistic nature of both knower and known, however, the challenge has become, for both philosopher and artist, to tease out, evoke, and then only glimpse a sense for "what is" out of the layers of assumed meaning within a relatively closed system of perception-expression. These insights into the interpreter's stance offer a corrective to reliance on any one method of analysis and result in a more appropriate modesty over interpretive claims. For example, Paul Ricoeur, in his *Interpretation Theory*, draws on the insights of phenomenology and its identification of the search for being within facticity without limiting his own system of analysis to its presuppositions and conclusions. In particular, he would agree with Palmer's analysis that the semantic automony of a literary text reveals, potentially, a new way of being in the world through its "saying power" (248) by altering "the interpreter himself from the side of the text" (247). Or, as Ricoeur puts it, "It is the text, with its universal power of world disclosure, which gives a self to the ego" (95).

Palmer's summary theses include also a definition of "what makes a work of art truly 'art' . . . the fact that in a definite form a world is abidingly able to come to stand, to open up a space in being, to enable the truth of being to become manifest" (245). Again, the implications of such a statement for the nature of reality, truth, and art are complex, but primary emphasis remains on the aesthetic experience connected with questions of existence as a whole, not separated from them as subjective pleasure in contrast to objective truth. In the case of Ricoeur, as in the four thinkers of Palmer's study, the founding nature of language and its capacity to express and reveal being unites all forms of understanding as fundamentally derivative, but as, nonetheless, containing a potential for creative insight. By implication, art in all its forms reflects but also our affects comprehension of ourselves and the world, of ourselves in the world, and,

especially, of the world in and through which we come to understand ourselves--that is, of the world in ourselves.[39]

Among the implications of such a view of art is the assertion that form and content are not separable but come to expression as a unity. The meaning, therefore, comes to expression in the form. Furthermore, the expression is never complete:

> . . . never total or unambiguous; the emergence into "unconcealment" is rather the simultaneous covering up of truth in its inexhaustible fullness. . . . [G]rounded in negativity . . . the discovery of truth proceeds best within a dialectic . . . with negativity which is intrinsic to experience. . . . Truth is not conceptual, not fact--it happens. (Palmer 245)

Ricoeur calls this happening-through-the-autonomy-of-the-text "event." And examining the work as a whole will bring Tillie Olsen's *Tell Me a Riddle* more fully into "unconcealment" through discovering the full course of its strategies and of its narrative logic.

"I Stand Here Ironing": Immediacy and Presence

Tillie Olsen's thin volume, *Tell Me a Riddle*, opens with the dedication: "For My Mother/1885-1956." In all four stories that follow, the role of the mother is central and determinative, especially as voice for the questions each raises.

The title of the first, "I Stand Here Ironing," is repeated as the opening line of the text, followed by the compounding clause, "and what you asked me moves tormented back and forth with the iron" (9). As with each of the initial sentences in the collection, this statement is a figure for what follows. The standing, ironing mother, another Olsen character to remain anonymous throughout her first-person account, is narrator, subject, and audience, as she is ultimately subject *to* her own ruminating, tormented observations that make up the work. Her attempt to respond to an inquiry from her daughter's school falters and finally fails with the claim that she never can and never will answer. However, her protests of inadequacy over both knowing and telling, are expressed, in fact, in eloquent internal dialogue, addressed to a questioner she will never face; and the movement of ideas, back and forth, mimic the rhythms of her ironing. But, according to her testimony, the result is finally a shaping that merely flattens out the wrinkles, an

enumeration of events and experiences without the comprehension necessary for true understanding. Thus this narrator begins with a humility characteristic of the best of story-tellers. As mother she is metaphor for the skeptical stance toward the effort at creativity, while as narrator of her particular story, she becomes the figure for the fictive imagination itself, representing the incentive for invention, the role of author, the character of the narrating process, its final purpose and underlying sensitivity. (The original title of this work was "On the Writing of a Story: 'Help Her to Believe.'")

The content of the mother's story is poignant and yet familiar. The "you" of the initial sentence is her daughter Emily's counsellor who wishes she "'would manage the time to come in and talk . . . help me understand . . . a youngster who needs help and whom I'm deeply interested in helping'"(9). The mother meditates on the request--"'who needs help . . .'"--from a willing audience, an iteration that sends widening circles around a need that asks to be addressed, an aporia which motivates expression: "'help . . . help . . . helping.'" In case we miss the cry in this impulse toward invention, it is repeated by the narrator once more--"'Who needs help.'"--and a question is sounded, by implication and over-extension of the sense: Who *does*, in fact, need help? The counsellor claims the need clearly, first for herself, and then for Emily, the deprived and distressed child. But in the narrator's final echo of the question, it slips free of its antecedents to range through what follows as reflexive in the utterances of the narrator herself.

The balance of the work is the mother's chronological account of her daughter's life and its hardships, of Emily as victim of history, of circumstance, and of a particular family's fate and irresponsibility. However, the immediate details of the story are continually in tension with the narrator's struggle to give form to the events as an intimate participant in them and as prior to them, that is, as their perpetrator who set them in motion, guided, and is now called upon to recreate, explain, and comprehend them. In other words, the narrator discovers that, from its inception to its evaluation, a life is an interpretation. Thus the telling of the story meets a resistance in her regret over its beginnings, implicated as she is in its unfolding, and over its never-to-be-realized fulfillment. Both the life and the story-telling are subject to this regret, guilt, and despair so that the account develops, first through contradiction, then through reluctance to proceed, and, finally, through failure to address directly its initiating and intimidating questioner.

The ultimate tension arises from the embeddedness of the mother's struggle--its "silence"--and then, ironically, through her eloquent presence in the text. The goal, and Tillie Olsen's primary concern in all her work--that creative expression "come to the writing"--is shown here in both its possibilities: that is, the mother-narrator's story is, in fact, told as she asserts and demonstrates how her daughter's cannot be. As speaker, she raises key questions which, in her role as reader of their story, she cannot herself finally appropriate and interpret.[40]

The account develops with a chronological rehearsal of mother and daughter's life together, paralleled by reflexive comment on the story-teller's task, that is, her effort "to understand."

> 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 me, beyond me.
>
> And when is there time to remember, to sift, to weigh, to estimate, to total? I will start and there will be an interruption and I will have to gather it all together again. Or I will become engulfed with all I did or did not do, with what should have been and what cannot be helped. (9)

This plea, that understanding reflect back upon the struggling interpreter's inadequacy as author of the life and of the story, mirrors the inherent contradiction of expecting that this mother, limited in the original nurturing of her daughter, should be able "to remember, to sift, to weigh, to estimate, [and, eventually] to total." In order to follow the intricacies of thought and feeling that comprise the rest of the work, we are enjoined to lend, not only a sympathetic, but also a convoluted ear, familiar to phenomenological analysis, and an image Olsen uses elsewhere for the open, attentive, and sensitive interpreter.

Whether restrained or motivated by her reservations, the narrator continues: "She was a beautiful baby" (10). At the beginning of Emily's story, then, a definitive assertion is followed by contrast and then contradiction, Tillie Olsen's characteristic strategy to convey ambiguity and ironic reversal in human experience:

> . . . how new and uneasy her tenancy in her now-loveliness. You did not know her all those years she was thought homely, or see her pouring over her baby

> pictures, making me tell her over and over how beautiful she had been--and would be, I would tell her--and was now, to the seeing eye. But the seeing eyes were few or non-existent. Including mine. (10)

The over-and-back of the ironing has anticipated this pattern of realization, contradiction, and promise possible only to the seeing eye, the hearing ear. Another confession of inadequacy by this sensitive observer-chronicler is, again, contradicted by the insight and attentiveness actually revealed in the chronicle.

The next paragraph begins, "I nursed her," with another description of the failed ideal: "with all the fierce rigidity of first motherhood. . . . Though her cries battered me to trembling and my breasts ached with swollenness, I waited till the clock decreed" (10). The narrator puzzles: "Why do I put that first? I do not even know if it explains anything" (10). To know, to understand is the motive for the reluctant account, expressed just as consistently as every attempt "to total" will be questioned.

"She was a beautiful baby" repeats again the initiating idea of the earliest remembrance, like a refrain sounded out of hope that it might ultimately prevail over the disappointments that intervene. Completely self-forgetful in her description of the infant's encounter with the world of the senses--sound, motion, light, color, texture: "She was a miracle to me" (10)--the mother ends with the tolling contradiction: "but when she was eight months old I had to leave her day times with the woman downstairs to whom she was no miracle at all" (10). We learn that when her mother was nineteen Emily's father, who "could no longer endure sharing want with us" (10), left them to the world of the Depression. The "clogged weeping" of the child makes palpable her desertion at the mercy of an economic system's failure.[41] But they did endure, a fact finally conspicuous for its unacknowledged testimony by the text.

Following another turn in the struggle against deprivation--"a job hashing at night so I could be with her days" (11)--and of failure--"But it came to where I had to bring her to his family and leave her" (11)--the darkening mood, like an undertow, echoes and intensifies the earlier, first instance of separation. The arrangement, necessary to raise money, and then to wait out a childhood illness, delays Emily's eventual return, "[a]ll her baby loveliness gone" (11).

This repetition-with-variation closes the account of their earliest years together, the child's promise, and the mother's first reckoning toward the impossible totaling.

"She was two" marks a change as the attempt at chronological ordering resumes, and the first reference to "they" intrudes into the account. According to "they," Emily is old enough for nursery school. The narrator pleads ignorance of the conditions she later came to acknowledge: "the fatigue of a long day . . . lacerations of group life . . . only parking places for children" (11). And the contradictions follow: "Except that it would have made no difference . . . the only place . . . the only way . . . the only way. . . . And even without knowing I knew" (11). The patterned iterations echo with hopelessness as the reversal produces its classical counterpart, recognition, but with no means of restoring after the fact: "the teacher was evil. . . . Emily hated it. . . . [A]ll these years it has curdled into my memory" (11). Though Emily had never clutched or implored, like her younger siblings, she had tried excuses, but never, the mother recalls, outright rebellion. And the story-telling founders on another question--"What in me demanded that goodness in her? . . . and the cost to her of such goodness?"--with the first of a series of honest questions, not fully heard. The narrator, suddenly ill herself, "puts the iron down" and recalls the old man, the neighbor, who had gently advised she should smile more at Emily. "What *was* in my face when I looked at her? I loved her. There were all the acts of love" (12). Thus another query, during a break from the relentless ironing, combines the assertion of love with protests against the anxiety that left little room for feelings or expressions of reassurance. Here the narrator forgets her theme about the inability "to total" and approaches a basic question that emerges from the mass of contradictions: "What *was* in my face . . .? I loved her. . . . all the acts of love." With her other children she took to heart the old man's words, but "too late for Emily" (12).

On the border between experience and interpretation, the mother interrupts her own reflections with another contradiction, trigged by its mirroring of the previous episode. Unlike the others, again, Emily does not smile easily--"her face is closed and sombre, but when she wants, how fluid" (12). The narrator's implied but absent audience, the enquiring counsellor, is invoked: "You must have seen it in her pantomimes, you spoke of her rare gift for comedy" (12), and we learn of the laughter Emily's mimes induce, "so dear they applaud and applaud and

do not want to let her go" (12). A contrasting lack of humor in the narration, along with its failure of perspective, leaves the chronicler taking up iron and story again, about better days, a new father, and a new threat--Emily's fear of being left alone, with a clock that "talked loud" (13). Emily succumbs to another childhood illness, and her mother, with a new baby, is too exhausted to offer solace after nightmares: "Twice, only twice, when I had to get up for Susan anyhow, I went in to sit with her" (13). The words toll again, "too late," for, in another reversal, Emily refuses comforting: "'No, I'm all right, go back to sleep, Mother'" (13). The official and officious "they" appear again, this time in the form of a social worker who advises a convalescent home, and Emily's shuttling from place to place recurs, along with her mother's alternating hopes and fears. The charitable institution, pictured often on the society pages--"with sleek young women planning affairs to raise money for it" (14)--is deceptive in its setting of green lawns, tall trees, and high balconies--from which the children, "wearing gigantic red bows and ravaged looks," have to shriek down to be heard by their visiting parents "every other Sunday" (14). The contradictions become reversals again as separation and thwarted love go hand-in-hand in the figures of Emily and the tiny girl she befriends whose parents never come to visit and who is herself finally moved elsewhere because "they don't like you to love anybody here" (14). When she is finally released, Emily has learned their lessons of withholding well, "stiffening and pushing others away."

A brief reflection on her daughter's "lightness . . . twinkling on skates, bouncing up and down, up and down over the jump rope, skimming over the hill" (15) belies again the mother's claim that the seeing eye was non-existent. But her memories return to dwell on the child who "fretted . . . thin and dark and foreign-looking" in a "Shirley-Temple era." No one came to play or to be best friends. At school Emily was a poor learner, in spite of diligence, because she was neither glib nor quick. Asthma attacks, and comfort derived from sorting over her prized collections, explain a truancy that, her mother asserts, was also a shield against "that terrible world of youthful competition" and a protection from "the merciless physical drives" (17).

Narration breaks off again as cries from the current baby interrupt both ironing and story-telling, but not the contradictions. Quieting her small son, the mother reveals that the "time of Motherhood is almost behind me when the ear is not one's own but must always be racked

and listening for the child cry, the child call" (17). Is this the testimony of an unseeing, unhearing progenitor of a life and a tale? In another hiatus from the ironing board she observes:

> "Shoogily," [the little boy] breathes and curls closer. . . . Shoogily. A funny word, a family word, inherited from Emily, invented by her to say: *comfort.*
>
> In this and other ways she leaves her seal, I say aloud. And startle at my saying it. What do I mean? What did I start to gather, to try and make coherent? (18)

Query and hesitation constitute doubt here over interpretation in a reflexive interruption of the on-going story. Is the seal that Emily set, the form she offered to childhood as she passed through it in the midst of her family, partner to her mother's capacity to tell the story? And where did Emily's feelings and insights get their impetus? Who among her audience would most consistently "not let her go," and to whom was the shaping of Emily's life entrusted?

The chronicle resumes: "[A]t the terrible, growing years . . . she had to help be a mother, and housekeeper, and shopper. She had to set her seal" (18). Claiming not to remember them well, the narrator reiterates a catalogue of daily sensations and crises: the morning hysteria and emergencies, the lunches to pack, hair to comb, coats and shoes to be found, Emily's papers scribbled by the children, her books mislaid and homework unfinished--"the unpreparedness, stammering and unsure" in the huge school. There was never time for it all, and at night the "struggle over books, . . . and I would be ironing. . . . Sometimes, to make me laugh, or out of her despair, she would imitate happenings or types at school" (18). Thus, she discloses that the child's ingenuity offers relief from routine to the mother who, in turn, suggests the audition for an amateur hour.

> One morning she phoned me at work, hardly understandable through the weeping: "Mother, I did it. I won, I won; they gave me first prize; they clapped and clapped and wouldn't let me go."
>
> Now suddenly she was Somebody, and as imprisoned in her difference as she had been in anonymity.

The harried narrator judges communication to be only further estrangement, and response, acknowledgement of difference.

Having finally attended one of Emily's pantomimes, the mother recalls her "thin, shy . . . almost drowned . . . into the curtains" child, followed by "the control, the command, the convulsing and deadly clowning, the spell, then the roaring, stamping audience, unwilling to let this rare and precious laughter out of their lives" (19). Afterwards, "they" pressed again, this time for the cultivation of Emily's gift, but "without money or knowing how" it was left to her and "often eddied inside, clogged and clotted" (19), like the crying over thwarted love many years earlier (11).

Repetition of what the mother's ear retained, curdled into memory, and later applied to other circumstances, underlines her ultimate attentiveness, as well as her unacknowledged and, perhaps contradictory, "understanding."

The last interruption in the account finally brings the story and the thematic development to focus. Emily herself arrives on the scene, taking the stairs two at a time--"Whatever it was occasioned your [the counsellor's] call did not happen today" (19)--and the story and context together begin to unravel simultaneously: "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. . . . She is so lovely. Why did you want me to come in at all? Why were you concerned? She will find her way" (19-20). Her daughter's humorous insight into the perpetual rocking/ironing images informs the narrator's consciousness as it also contributes an icon for the reader's comprehension. But Emily's reply to her inquiry about exams--"'Oh, those . . . in a couple of years when we'll all be atom-dead they won't matter a bit'" (20)--threatens to engulf the narrator again in pessimism, and she begs off coping with that reality "because I have been dredging the past, and all that compounds a human being is so heavy and meaningful in me, I cannot endure it tonight" (20).

A coda follows that is a succinct restatement of the story's form, ultimately as contradiction, in which the mother-narrator repeats again her original claim--"I will never total it all. I will never come in to say . . ."--and then proceeds, in fact, to replay each theme:

> She was a child seldom smiled at. Her father left. . . . I had to work . . . I sent her home. . . . [S]he had care she hated . . . was dark and thin and foreign-looking . . . slow. . . . She was a child of anxious, not proud love . . . [that]

> could not afford the soil of easy growth. . . . [a] young . . . distracted mother. . . . other children pushing up, demanding. . . . Her younger sister . . . all that she was not. . . . [S]he did not want me to touch her . . . kept too much to herself. . . . My wisdom came too late. . . . has much to her and probably little will come of it. . . . [a] child of her age, of depression, of war, of fear. (20)

Whether encompassing "all," the effort here at totaling cannot be faulted.

The last paragraph follows as petition, or even injunction: "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" (21)--by a mother who has refused finally to co-operate with the world of the counsellor ("they"), and whose wisdom may not, after all, be "too late." But the imperative voice is also supplication: "Only help her to know--help make it so there is cause for her to know--that she is more than this dress on the ironing board, helpless before the iron" (21)--or before the diminished totaling of the maternal assessment.

The mother's account of a child's life, according to her own experience of it--subject to invariability under the flattening, searing influence of memory and time--has been released here, through the telling, to a freedom to be heard--and lived--differently, even contradictorily. The mother's hope and the narrator's contradictions combine to produce doubt in the mind of the reader, in spite of the power of their poignancy, about whether getting the tale told is the true goal of this story-telling after all. Much more than "little" has already come of it, and much more than "totaling" has been revealed. The iron is finally stilled, it seems, but the dialogue of several lifetimes goes on, and the end, the purpose, appears to be in the on-going story that began long before "I stand here ironing" and will continue long after the writng and the reading come to a close. The real story ends with its beginning--the ironing is never done--and begins with its end --"I stand here ironing." It cannot be understood until it is told and cannot be told before it is understood. Therefore, no one can total it all, all will not bloom, but there is "still enough left to live by." An "open" form, finally, is appropriate for conveying what begins as, and will remain, essentially a mystery.

Or has the mother unwittingly supplied the key? In mirroring her daughter's life with the miming of her ironing board, her interpretation may not need "to total" or finalize, but only open

up experience to be shared, as the narrator's convoluted ear turns on a story that is, after all, well told.

Tillie Olsen's themes in *Tell Me a Riddle* reflect the concern of post-modern literature with the "how" of literary expression, and the piece, "I Stand Here Ironing," addresses that question most directly. Her investigation of a mother's struggle over expression, of the effort to "come to the writing"/speaking, can be illuminated by applying to it the dynamics discussed in Ricoeur's *Interpretation Theory* in an analysis of spoken and written discourse.

Ricoeur acknowledges what he calls "the skepticism of semiotics"--the belief that "the fundamental solitude of each human being" and the isolation of his/her experience is private and non-transferrable (15-16); but he also counters this skepticism with the claim that the soul of discourse is dialogical and that in an event that intends to speak to someone and to be acknowledged, language becomes the process by which private experience is made public, and "impression is transcended and becomes ex-pression" (19). As a result, "the solitude of life is for a moment . . . illuminated by the common light of discourse" (19)--literally held in common, communicated. The mother's interior struggle at the ironing board, "tormented" by the incommunicability of her daughter's experience (to her), and by her incapacity to "read" and interpret what she does know, is sounded in a contemplated response to her absent questioner: "You think because I am her mother I have a key, or that in some way you could use me as a key? . . . There is all that life that has happened outside of me, beyond me" (10). In the mother's awareness, "all that life" refers not only to her daughter's personal history, but to the cultural codes and their fixation and contradiction in the very language used to search them out.

"Help me to understand" is the problem posed from the start in Olsen's *Tell Me a Riddle*; and, with it, the conundrum as the work's underlying metaphor is established. The mother must *tell* the riddle as she stands ironing if it is even to be considered; and, thus, the riddle is compounded: getting the "help" so urgently requested in the opening lines of Olsen's work depends upon the "how" as well as upon the "what" of human expression. If the "how" is, in fact, a truncated game, the question arises whether the "what" ever even becomes an issue? Along with Ricoeur, Olsen's narrator recognizes that the effort to convey meaning is subject to the limits of communication. In turn, Ricoeur would agree that expression is illusive and partial,

but he points to the potential within the "how" and the possibility he believes it provides for revealing both the "what" and the "what about."

The first application of Ricoeur's analysis to "I Stand Here Ironing" lies in the observation that the event of the mother's speech is interrupted at the start by her reticence to address her questioner in person. Discouraged by previous encounters with the "they" of her daughter's world, she decides that a response to Emily's counsellor would be unproductive for, or even harmful to, Emily's welfare. Therefore, the potential conversation remains merely virtual--a one-sided, internal and suppressed dialogue--as the speaker, in fact, addresses only herself; the actualization of somebody speaking (the "noetic" for Ricoeur) is unrealized. Although the locutionary expression of saying something is contemplated (what the speaker intends to say) with the conjunction of identification/predication (or the "noema"), the locutionary (to *say* something, or meaning), the illocutionary (to *do* something in saying--to inform or motivate), and the perlocutionary (to *yield* something in saying through eliciting a hearer's response) are never realized because the interlocutionary act (to be *addressed to* someone) is unfulfilled and communication, therefore, suppressed (14-15). In other words, the "what" of the mother's discourse, or its objective sense, is never related to its "what about" outside the sentences themselves through the reference of the hearer; and the relation between language and what Ricoeur calls "the ontological condition of being in the world" is never tested (19-20); that is, the mother's use of language in orienting herself to the situations that she and her daughter have encountered together in the world does not reach the issue of truth as expressed to another within a shared reference. In her setting at the ironing board, Tillie Olsen's character remains, from the writer's point of view, silent, in spite of her perceptive eloquence, and stands as one whose thoughts never "come to the writing"/speaking as discourse.[42]

But this solitary figure, alone with the poignancy of her puzzling experience, has, in fact, a spokesperson in the writer who gives her a voice as narrator; consequently, the reader can "overhear" the internal dialogue at the ironing board and derive from the utterance's meaning what Ricoeur calls "the sense" that the distanciation of inscription has recorded there. That sense, in turn, can be referred to the reader's world in an event that completes a process begun with Tillie Olsen's creative intention to speak for the voiceless. In doing so, she has made a case

for speaking and listening as acts of communication that posit human being. Olsen both represents the pain of failing to express the riddle and also releases that pain for realization in a particular reader's understanding. In her terms, she has broken the silence imposed by the lack of "time to remember, to sift, to weigh, to estimate, to total" that the mother professes to suffer because, as she put it, of "interruption." In Ricoeur's analysis, Olsen's "bringing to the writing" has also made "private experience . . . public [as] impression is transcended and becomes expression" (19). Through the author's story as vehicle, "the solitude of life is for a moment . . . illuminated," held in common, that is, communicated (19). In the process, the reader becomes the narrator's hearer, and an event of reference occurs in which what the mother "talks about" can be applied to the new situation of the reader's world of reference.

This particular reader sees the narrator's own prevailing pattern of contrast-becoming-contradiction as a way through her sense of failure to, in fact, understand--"to weigh, to sift. . . ." As Emily observes, "'Aren't you ever going to finish the ironing, Mother?'" (19). The mother concludes: "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. . . ." The ironing as metaphor for failed interpretation, the ruminating among contrasts that ends in ultimate contradiction and near-despair, may be calling to be put aside (like the iron) for the release from their flattened diminishment of both the daughter's life and the mother's effort.

The conscious construction that Tillie Olsen's narrator has put on the riddle she cannot satisfactorily tell proves finally too confining to elicit meaning from the welter of experience. If she can put the iron aside, she may become her own hearer and discover that she *has* told the story and can release it to a new reference in a daughter who has actually received *from her* "more than enough to live by." It is within the narrator's own power as reader to "help her to know . . . that she is more than . . . helpless before the iron." A pattern that repeats so relentlessly is thus calling for release as too confined by the self-reflexive to do justice to the interpretation of a life. The mother has attempted to "total it all" and is unsatisfied. The experience has never been brought "to the writing," has, as the mother says of Emily's own gifts, "as often eddied inside, clogged and clotted, as been used and growing" (19). Like the old woman in the title story, this narrator asks, "unused the life. . . . And who has meaning? . . .

Still all in us not to grow?" (108). Withheld from the communication that can make an event out of a mere weighing and estimating, it cannot reveal a new way to remember, to be, and to live in the future. On the other hand, although she must go back to the ironing, and cannot forget the past, the mother can, through communication, appropriate the work she *has* accomplished as open to a new comprehension. The "key" may lie not only in reconstruction of memory alone, but also in being freed to begin again in the present, in reevaluating the past and envisioning a wider future.

For Ricoeur, "the inscription of discourse is the transcription of the world, and transcription is not reduplication, but metamorphosis" (42). The narrator/mother, in effect, is being called to a more open metaphor, beyond the incessant, the solitary ironing through which she herself has made of their experience "this dress on the ironing board, helpless before the iron" (21). The constant iteration, evoking no response, results in frustration which finally elicits an answering event, interpretation that can offer "help" in a transformed understanding. Emily's gentle humor over the rocking/ironing mothers has the potential for initiating that transformation.

"I Stand Here Ironing" is not only a mother's poignant struggle to understand the cruel limitations of her daughter's childhood. It establishes, at the opening of *Tell Me a Riddle,* the human predicament: standing under the catalogue of events and images that make up a life, we fail to total its repetitions and refrains into ultimate sense. Continually moving back and forth between contrasts that contradict rather than reconcile, the human subject, the self-conscious intelligence, stands defeated in her search for meaning. The intention to tell the riddle, thwarted by such limitations, turns in conclusion to address an unnamed presence with a plea for help beyond the situation: "Let her be. . . . Only help her to know--make it so there is cause for her to know--that she is more than . . ." what a mother's solitary search can make of her daughter's "helplessness before the iron."

Thus this first work in the collection is also a figure for the expressive intention of human beings which becomes à key to interpretation, not only for what it knows, but because of how it potentially works. Such expression is also, in Tillie Olsen's terms, the means to fuller humanity. "To bring to the writing" offers the possibility of "a new way of being in the world,"

according to Ricoeur, that Olsen's further telling of the riddle may yet prompt in the subsequent three stories.

At the close of his work, Ricoeur addresses the process of interpretation, or "the range of attitudes a reader may entertain when confronted with a text" (71), for which his previous discussions have been prologue. Based on his formulaic analysis that the dialectic of reading (of sense related to reference) corresponds to the dialectic of discourse (of intentional event and meaning), his theory of discourse becomes the governing factor for interpretation theory, including explanation--the explication of a range of meanings--and understanding--the grasp as a whole of the claim of partial meanings in one act of synthesis in a new reference (72). Furthermore, based on his analysis that oral discourse is produced as event and understood as meaning, and that utterer's and utterance's meaning communicate through the same shared sphere of meaning, all written texts (which exteriorize what remains implicit in oral discourse) rely upon reading's "complex mediated dialectic involving explanation [of the sense] and understanding [in the new field of reference]" for their interpretation (74). Thus, for Ricoeur, a dialectical analysis of the sense, not empathy with the intention of the author, constitutes interpretation, and he traces the interpretive process through the three stages of understanding as guess, explanation as mediation between two stages of understanding, and understanding as comprehension through appropriation that uses productively the initial distanciation of inscription.

Tillie Olsen says it better as her narrator comments upon the problem of herself as thwarted reader of her daughter's life: "And when is there time to remember, to sift, to weigh, to estimate, to total? I will start and there will be an interruption and I will have to gather it all together again. Or I will become engulfed with all I did or did not do, with what should have been and what cannot be helped" (9). She struggles with the challenge in and potential of distanciation and becomes enmeshed in a Romantic empathy for herself as original "speaker" which does not clarify. "And with her subsequent statements--'I feel suddenly ill. I put the iron down'" (12)--the mother's effort to "grasp as a whole" points to the end of her (and Ricoeur's) initial guess that founders on the plea: "Only help her to know. . . ." Interpretation must finally reverse the dialectic of the speaker/writer in an analysis of the narrative logic of the text which

can offer, then, the possibility of a second event, the reader's appropriation and comprehension. The mother in "I Stand Here Ironing" has begun the initial guess by attempting "to construe the meaning as the verbal meaning of the text" (74), which is largely "divinatory." In Ricoeur's terms, she recognizes the need for a "cumulative holistic process" that goes beyond linear sequence and "sees the interrelationship of parts and whole, arranging the details of its stereoscopic structure into a hierarchy of topics" (76-77): "In this and other ways she leaves her seal, I say aloud. And startle at my saying it. What do I mean? What did I start to gather together, to try and make coherent?" (18). But it is left to the reader of Olsen's text, who overhears her struggle, to proceed with Ricoeur's further steps--through validation-explanation and structuralist "logic," to understanding as comprehension.

Structural analysis of "I Stand Here Ironing" as explanation of the question behind the text becomes, then, the way through to comprehension. Olsen's narrator acts as reflexive comment on the writing process, but in a specific, concrete situation for which three clues are offered for interpretation. The first is the contradiction-reversal pattern itself, built up through repeated episodes, with their catalogue of Emily's formative experiences, as interpreted by her mother, the creator of the work. The second is Emily's "seal," set through the creation of a new language--"Shoogily"--to offer comfort where none seems possible, to own her relationship to the family that struggles for and with her without resolution. Finally, the metaphor of the ironing board itself challenges Emily's capacity to mime a theme out of despair into laughter by mirroring, but in contradiction--that is, for purposes of humor rather than despair. Through her "art," which offers a counter-metaphor that can distance and, at the same time, model a way out of confinement--"Whistler's mother"--Emily invites her mother to stop the incessant rocking (alias ironing) and step out of her own picture. The reversal that results can put an end to the repetitions and catalogues, or at least interrupt them, and release their perpetrator to "a new way of being in the world." Emily's art--whether coining words, offering painful moments up to laughter via mime, or promoting a model for release from a patterned response--finally serves the cause that her mother so desperately, but ineffectually, tries to promote--that is, knowing that one is "more than helpless. . ." (20).

"Hey Sailor, What Ship": Solitude and Voice

If "I Stand Here Ironing" is about interruption and silence that short-circuit understanding, "Hey Sailor, What Ship" explores the incoherency and gaps that plague the act of telling. Growing up, and the painful failure to support the child, make up the situation in the first; dying and its prefiguring in the response to failure in life predominate in the latter three stories. The narrating mother despairs over creative expression through her struggle with reluctance, contradiction, and a reflexive view of barriers to telling the whole tale. Whitey, in "Hey Sailor," withdraws from the joy and pain of his own drama as a result of failures and alcoholism. In all four stories in the collection, the situations are psycho-social. Lives are diminished by limiting social and economic conditions, but human freedom surfaces in the choice, ultimately left open, to condemn or claim the time--to run away or to come back.

"I Stand Here Ironing" is built on repetition of phrases and sentences for emphasis, on truncated expressions that understate feelings, on contrast followed by contradiction that leaves openings for interpretation. The "tormented back and forth with the iron" has neither beginning nor end, and is reflected in the narrator's quandary over the series of events lived through by mother and daughter. Similarly, "Hey Sailor, What Ship," entitled with an elliptical phrase, opens on a succession of unresolved descriptions--catalogues of the senses--that express Whitey's impaired point of view--"The grimy light; the congealing smell . . . ; the boasting, cursing, wheedling, cringing voices; and the greasy feel of the bar as he gropes for his glass" (22)--and Whitey's story continues, literally, to feel its way through a sensate, but progressively more numbing, drama in two acts. The first is a mistimed rehearsal for the second, and both are developed, predominantly, through direct dialogue. Whitey, as the star actor and main character, fails in both roles, but his failure raises questions about what it means to succeed in the world that rejects him. Thus the suppressed dialogue of the ironing mother's story becomes actualized in the sailor's performance, but Whitey's story also features a soliloquizing and silenced narrator who often speaks only to himself. Hearing and seeing, taste, smell, and touch act here as the shared means to knowledge, but the summing up of a life-long attempt to communicate a sense of value and purpose founders on the shoals of repression and anonymity.

Following the opening description, the line *"Hey Sailor, What Ship"* repeats the title and expresses Whitey's unspoken enquiry into who he is, or has become, in the form of the sailor's traditional greeting and insignia. But no answering response follows, only "his face flaring in the smoky mirror." Although "the veined gnawing" and a call for music to fill the silence mixes with a phrase, *"(Lennie and Helen and the kids),"* he does not know the time or what it is he "gotta": "Gotta something. Stand watch? No, din't show last night, ain't gonna show tonight, gonna sign off. Out loud: Hell with ship. You got any friends, ship? then hell with your friends. That right, Deeck?" (22). But his friend has already deserted him, as does "a nameless one" in the bar to whom he loans a buck--for "Company." At the beginning of his story, Whitey faces rejection, within and without. He inventories his pockets for money: "A pawn ticket, Manila; card, 'When in Managua it's Marie's for Hospitality'; union book; I.D. stuff; trip card; two ones, one five, . . . And the hands tremble. Where'd it all go? and he lurches through the past. . . " (23).

Whitey's world no longer yields to persuasion, and a second theme--identity through naming--emerges with the references to "I.D. stuff" and the "trip card." He mimics the paymaster who would not give him his wages--"Too stewed to sign your name" (24). The bar keeper doesn't know him, "Michael Jackson," though he has been drinking all night, all day: "Bell knows me. Get Bell. Been drinkin' here twenty-three years, every time hit Frisco. Ask Bell / But Bell sold. Forgot. Forgot" (24). Like the ringing of harbor buoys, the name of the former proprietor merely echoes a warning. The search for a name, a seal, encounters mirrors and miming, repetitions and rebuffs. Next: "Go to Pearl's. *(Not Lennie and Helen and the kids?)*. . . But the idea is visual, not physical. . . . And he waits for the feeling good that should be there but there is none, only a sickness lurking" (24). Along with recognition and identity, the affirmation of feeling good eludes him.

After he stumbles outside, under "the Bulkhead sign bile green in the rain," and, amidst the screech of brakes, curses the cars--"M. Norbert Jacklebaum makes 'em stop"--he hears his name shouted and, finally recognized, finds himself in the front seat of Lennie's car. There are no questions; he only sits "while the sickness crouches . . . , *going to see Lennie and Helen and*

the kids, no present for 'em, an' don't even feel good. Hey Sailor, What Ship?" (24-25). His destination, twice voiced but unsought, has finally discovered him.

Thus, "he gets there after all, four days and everything else too late"; to an old peaked house on a hill Lennie brings him, "imagined and entered . . . over and over again, in a thousand various places and a thousand various times: on watch . . . lying on his bunk . . . from sidewalk beds . . . flophouses and jails . . . sitting silent at union meetings . . . waiting . . . listening. . . " (25). His dominant image in this first visit to the hillside house of old friends, above "the front," is of a beached castaway, swept by successive waves of sensation, vulnerable in all his senses, assaulted by sights, sounds, feelings, touch, and taste:

> Helen. (Helen? so . . . grayed?), Carol, Allie, surging upon him. A fever of hugging and kissing. 'sabout time, shrills Carol over and over again. 'Sabout time. . . .
>
> *Who is real and who is not?* Jeannie, taller than Helen suddenly, just standing there watching.
>
> . . . How long since you've eaten? And Helen looks at him, kisses him again, and begins to cry. (25)

His sensations intensify: Jeannie's teenage disapproval, Helen's tired look--"Mommy oughta quit work, volunteers Carol; she's tired. All the time" (26)--the little girls' demands: "Whirl me round like you always do. . . . Thought you were going to send me stamps for my collection . . . help me make a puppet stage? . . . Sing a song, or say Thou Crown 'n Deep. . . . Can I bounce on you?" (26). Then

> Angry from the kitchen: Well, I don't care. I'm calling Marilyn and tell her not to come; we'll do our homework over there. . . .
>
> Shhh, Jeannie, shhh. He said that, or Helen? The windows are blind with steam, all hidden behind them the city, the bay, the ships. (26-27)

As Whitey confronts a dilemma--whether he is shut in or shut out--"the sickness springs at last and consumes him" (27), and the dinner Allie is ordered to feed him, forkful by forkful, "does not taste; the inside of him burns" (27). Although the city soon sparkles through the window

again, and Helen and Lennie sit with him, a doctor has also arrived, an old friend to whom he was once a hero: "No one looks good, and now a doctor: M. Norbert Jacklebaum's fine" (28).

They settle once more before the hearth--"your wood, Whitey . . . stuff you chopped three years back" (28)--and, feeling the effect of sleeping pills, of the fire, of rain started up again "that cannot pierce the windows" he asks Helen how she has been. "Keeping my head above water. She would tell him later. She always told him later, when he would be helping in the kitchen maybe . . . sometimes things she wouldn't even tell Lennie. And this time, the way she looked, the way Lennie looked. . ." (29).

His bewilderment deepens when Allie, running from a bad dream, curls up next to him and she goes instantly to sleep; for Whitey "starts as if he has been burned . . . begins stroking her soft hair. It is destroying him, dissolving him utterly, this helpless warmth against him, this feel of a child--lost country to him and unattainable" (29). He tells them then about "Yokohama, Cebu, Manila. (The begging children and the lost, the thieving children and the children who were sold.) And he strokes, strokes Allie's soft hair as if the strokes would solidify, dense into a protection" (29-30). Vulnerable himself, the old sailor cannot shield, but only suffer the child within.

There follow other stories that Len and Helen like to hear, about the trip and his shipmates:

> Guess what, they made me ship's delegate.
>
> Well, why not? asks Helen; you were probably the best man on board.
>
> A tide of peaceful drowsiness washes over the tumult in him . . . the veined brown hand still strokes, strokes Allie's soft pale hair. (31-32)

With Helen's recogition of who he is and the lulling of sound and touch, Whitey anchors in safe harbor.

Jeannie reenters this scene, returning--"Is that Helen?"--and admires "so many peaceful wrecks . . . holding hands with other peaceful wrecks," and offers their long-ago greeting, "Hey Sailor, what ship?" But when she asks about the new scar on his face, touching it lightly, Whitey starts up, so ill that the family retreats to let him sleep.

> [A]s Len carries Allie up the stairs, the fire leaps up, kindles Len's shadow so that it seems a dozen bent men cradle a child up endless stairs, while the rain traces on the windows, beseechingly, ceaselessly, like seeking fingers of the blind.
>
> *Hey Sailor, what ship? Hey Sailor, what ship?* (32)

Among the dominant images of this section, the burning sensation--that replaces taste, that startles Whitey's senses through the warmth of the helpless child, and that emanates from the fire--rivals references to rain that cannot pierce the windows and that is identified with his own longing for recognition, identity. Finally, the firewood that he had once provided, extends both the burning and sheltering images as it casts a shadow-vision of humanity, protective of the child, in its Sisyphean climb. Whitey thus feeds on his own destruction and shame while, at the same time, he tries to salvage what he loves from the storm of sickness and loss; and the affectionate, but challenging, refrain functions like a careening lighthouse signal, both reassuring and warning: "Hey Sailor, what ship?"

In the entr'acte, Whitey, awakens to an empty house, "the trembling, . . . and an unshared silence," and misses the sounds of sleeping shipmates and throbbing engines, or the noises of the street through flophouse walls. For "here there is [only] the whisper of the clock (motor by which the house runs now)" (32). A note, warning him not to go down to the front, closes with "Love."--fitting title for his inventory of the house which follows: "And up rises his old vision, of how he will return here, laden with groceries, no one in the littered house, and quickly, before they come, straighten the upstairs, clean . . . scrub . . . wash . . . and there's steak for dinner" (34). He leaves, the burning chill still in his stomach, after glossing his hand over a bookcase he painted fourteen years before: "Real good that red backing Helen liked so much 'cause it shows above the books. *Hey Sailor, what ship?*" (34). It is clear that Whitey's ultimate trip card identifies him with this house on the hill.

The derelict sailor's second entrance happens five days and untold episodes later, when a cabbie, loaded with bundles, arrives in the family kitchen, Whitey at his heels. The torrent of dialogue cascades again, interrupted by private reflections, both Whitey's and Helen's; for this final episode is Whitey's attempt to play out the traditional return of the sailor, home from the

sea, including the undertow of farewell implied in the original lines and expressed in his internal monologues.

The form, as conclusion, is established within the first exchange. Whitey, "feeling good, oh quite obviously feeling good," brags to the cabbie, "Didn't I tell you they're a good-looking bunch? triumphantly" and directs him to "take the whole five smackers" (35). When the girls all beg a ride--

> Don't let him go Whitey . . . screams Allie.
>
> To the top of the next hill and back, it's a windy curly round and round road, yells Carol.
>
> I'll go too, says Jeannie. (35)

--Lennie intervenes, "'[L]et the man go, he's working.'" Though Whitey has said, "Steak. Whatever you're eating, throw it out," he holds the family at the table, supplies an extra plate for Whitey, fends off the swearing, and insists his presents wait until later. Dishes must be done also "since we got organized" (34-36).

Attempts at dialogue issue in elliptical phrases, and successive speakers, in truncated paragraphs, keep up the manic pace. The banter focuses on a ten-dollar bill Whitey insists on giving Jeannie (to buy off "Her Highness'" disapproval); on Allie's demand to be whirled and bounced; on Whitey's reference to Marx' division of the world into two classes ("My class is divided by marks says Carol") (35); and on everyone's plea for Whitey's stories and Crown 'n Deep. Accented by his refrain--"Down the hatch"--each time he drinks from the pint he pulls from his pocket, the playfulness, innocent and drunken, continues as Whitey sings the bouncing, but ironic, Allie song: "What is life /Without a wife/ And a home/ Without a baby." But when more money is offered all 'round--"Helen likes money"--Helen orders the family upstairs, and Len insists they give back all Whitey's bills: "Stop throwing your goddam money round. Where do you think you are, down at the front? . . . and tone down the language" (39).

Whitey's reply, "Do *you* good to feel good for a change," echoes in his own silent plea--"(O feeling good, come back, come back)"--as he returns to stories of his role as ship's delegate, defending his shipmates' rights and inspiring the loyalty of "that kid Howie" (39). When

Jeannie reappears, in hat and coat, to thank him for jewelry he has brought her, he recalls another tie:

> Lennie, 'm gonna give her ten dollars. For treat her friends. After all, ain't she my wife?
>
> Whitey, do I have to hear that story again? I was four years old.
>
> Again? (He told the story . . . as often as anyone would listen, . . . and always as he told it, the same shy happiness would wing through him, how when she was four, she had announc[ed] triumphantly to her mother: I'm married to Whitey now. . . .) Sorry, royal highness won't mention it. How's watch I gave you, remember?
>
> (Not what he means to say at all. Remember the love I gave you, the worship offered, the toys I mended and made, the questions answered, the care for you, the pride in you.) (39-40)

Even his generosity fails as Jeannie accuses him of buying people's affection. When Helen orders her to the kitchen and Allie returns with her new present--"Your grandchild . . . I bet the biggest dolly in the store"--Whitey observes, "Thass good, honey, that she can't talk" (40).

Rejection turns inward with Carol's photo album:

> Don't look, he says to himself, closing his eyes. . . . Under the joyful sun, proud ship as background, the proud young man, glistening hair and eyes, joyful body, face open to life, unlined. . . . Close it up, he says, M. Norbert Jacklebaum never was the guy. Quit punchin' me.
>
> Nobody's punchin' you Whitey, says Allie. You're feeling your face.
>
> *Tracing the scars, the pis and lines, the battered nose; seeking to find.*
>
> Your name's Michael Jackson, Whitey, why do you always say Jacklebaum? marvels Allie. (40-41)

In this innocent question, his search for identity receives its most direct response, expressed also in the request that follows, that he repeat the beloved Crown 'n Deep. Finally, Whitey takes the "old proud stance," reminding them the Valedictory was Jose Rizal's pledge[43] the dawn before

his execution, taught to Whitey by Li'l Joe Roco who died at sea. Then he begins El Ultima Adios:

> Land I adore, farewell . . .
>
> Our forfeited garden of Eden,
>
> Joyous I yield up for thee my sad life
>
> And were it far brighter,
>
> Young or rose-strewn, still would I give it.
>
> Vision I followed from afar,
>
> Desire that spurred on and consumed me,
>
> Beautiful it is to fall,
>
> That the vision may rise to fulfillment.
>
> Go on, Whitey
>
> Little will matter, my country,
>
> That thou shouldst forget me.
>
> I shall be speech in thy ears, fragrance and color,
>
> Light and shout and loved song . . .
>
> Inaudible.
>
> O crown and deep of my sorrows,
>
> I am leaving all with thee, my friends, my love,
>
> Where I go are no tyrants. . . . (42-43)

Whitey sways on his feet, the poem unfinished.

The theme of foundering identity, reconstituted among a loved place and people, is countered in Whitey's reluctance to look at his picture as a young hopeful, in the gesture of searching his face, like the earlier blind fingers of rain down the window ("seeking to find"), and in the farewell Valedictory of the Philippine martyr: "I shall be speech in thy ears, fragrance and color/ Light and shout and lovèd song." As surely as it was Jose Rizal's, it becomes Whitey's farewell, not only to his land, his family--"our forfeited garden of Eden"--but to the tyrannies that have censured and imprisoned him. In the name of all his bedevilling senses, the high

flown, romantic verses of the beloved Valedictory carry, beyond its drunken, maudlin tone, Whitey's attempt to speak to the people he loves. But the contrast between the martyr's keen awareness of loss and Whitey's victimized perception turns tragedy or pathos into ironic realism, while the mix of romanticism and realism leads to an indeterminacy of tone that suggest contradictory interpretations.

Following this truncated recital, focus shifts to Helen's encounter with Jeannie. In answer to her daughter's objection to foul language in front of the little kids, Helen replies, "They don't hear the words, they hear what's behind them . . . worse words than cuss words, there are words that hurt" (42). Jeannie appears to ignore the reprimand and complains about having to return the ten dollars; but Helen persists:

> It's his money. He worked for it, it's the only power he has. . . . He belongs here, he's part of us, like family. . . . The only house in the world he can come into and be around people without having to pay. . . . He knows more about people and places. . . . You can learn from him. . . .
>
> Jeannie, I care you should understand. . . . You've got to understand. (43)

As Jeannie continues her accusation--"just a Howard Street wino"--the episode ends in Helen's repeated phrase, "To understand."

In the closing scene Whitey's explanations remain unspoken but parallel his truncated conversation, first with Lennie and then with Helen:

> *In the beginning there had been youth and the joy of raising hell and that curious inability to take a whore unless he were high with drink.*
>
> *And later there were memories to forget, dreams to be stifled, hopes to be murdered.* (44)

Instead of this disclosure about his alcoholism, Whitey voices to Lennie and Helen incidents from his past when he defied authority in order to demand justice for shipmates and subsequently lost promotion. Within a second silence, his eulogy to another failure follows:

> *Understand. The death of the brotherhood. Once, once an injury to one is an injury to all. Once, once they had to love for each other. . . . The only way of survival . . . the easy sharing. . . .*

Now it was a dwindling, few, and more and more of them winos. . . . (45)

A third "understand" (repeated five times in the final paragraphs) underlines Helen and Lennie's unspoken commitment to their life-long friend, and to instilling loyalty to him in their children. Moreover, the reiteration confirms what all Whitey's soliloquies also reveal--his continuing identity through all kinds of testing--while, at the same time, it foreshadows the end of that struggle. Like the ring of a harbor signal, "understand" becomes empty sound as it fails to guide a mariner to a safe berth, to recognition.

In contrast, his voice erupts with rejection: "Hey, came here to feel good. Down the hatch. Hell with you. You got any friends? Hell with your friends" (45). The familiar greeting and imprecation covers the silence which does not "come to the writing"--*Remember too much, too goddam much. For twenty-three years, the water shifting: many faces, many places"*--as he catalogues the ports of call that marked his gradual decline (45).

Helen asks twice, "What's going to happen to you, Whitey?" His first reply comes quickly: "Nobody has to care what happens to M. Jacklebaum," but his reverie concludes:

> *Understand. once they had been young together.*
>
> *To Lennie he remained a tie to adventure and a world in which men had not eaten each other. . . .*
>
> *To Helen he was the compound of much help given, much support: the ear to hear, the hand that understands how much a scrubbed floor, or a washed dish, or a child taken care of . . . can mean.*
>
> *They had believed in his salvation. . . .*
>
> *Now the decaying body, the body that was betraying him. And the memories to forget, the dreams to be stifled, the hopeless hopes to be murdered.* (46-47)

With the repetition of a nihilistic trinity that has become his fate, and hearing Helen ask for a second time, "What's going to happen to you," Whitey announces his departure. "Thirstily he tips the bottle to the end" and heads for a room where, shored up with Deeck, he "can yell or sing or pound . . . without reproach or pity or anguish" (47).

"Go own steam. Send you a card." Outside the door he passes Jeannie, "silent and shrunken in her coat," but finds the streets otherwise empty.

> The sullen fog is on his face, but by the time he has walked to the third hill, it has lifted so he can see the city below him, wave after wave, and there at the crest, the tiny house he has left, its eyes unshaded. After a while they blur with the myriad others that stare at him so blindly.
>
> Then he goes down. (47)

Moving among and, finally, beyond the blind-eyed windows and the fog, Whitey slips his moorings, afloat again and freed from a shoreside world run by the clock. As he descends the final hill, the sailor, who has already jumped ships twice--once, his berth at the front; and, second, his haven in port--"goes down" for the third time into anonymous "wave after wave" of the city and of his own consciousness.

> *Hey Sailor, what ship?*
>
> *Hey Marinero, what ship?* (47)

The opening refrain, sign of the mariner, magnifies, like the shadow of father and child on the firelit wall, into "El Ultimo," the great question: On what ship do you embark? toward what sacred isles? where the struggle for love and justice ends, the burning turns to sweetness, blindness to seeing and being seen, and all questions to a welcome home?--or into a dark and nameless sea?

The repetitions and refrains in "Hey Sailor" combine attachment and withdrawal--"What ship? Got any friends, ship? then hell with your friends"; "O feeling good, come back, come back"--as the forgotten memories, the stifled dreams, the murdered hopes confirm Whitey's end. In turn, catalogues mark a full life--"Yokohama, Cebu, Manilla"--and an empty one, while the embattled senses, the plaguing fires and fog, the calls for "feeling good" and for response are lost in an encroaching fog. And the contrasts between family moorings and beloved seafarer become contradiction in Jeannie's and Lennie's rejections and in Whitey's inevitable reversal to "go back down" to the front and to Deeck where he "can yell or sing or pound . . . without reproach or pity or anguish."

Metaphors also form chains and hierarchies here--the voyage, the voyager, and home port; adventure, the story-teller/poet, and the child; vocation as calling, the fight for justice within it, and the brotherhood; shelter, sex, and alcohol; wandering, loss, and the searching, supporting

hands. In the mix of dialogue, expressed and internal, a mother insists that her daughter distinguish between vulgar words and acts of mercy--"the ear to hear, the hand that understands . . ." --and plants the seed: "This to teach."

The last act of "Hey Sailor, What Ship?" drifts between tough-tender oxymoron and declamatory bathos: the champion of shipmates and the boasting drunk, the sheltering family and rejecting friends, the responsive woman and the unforgiving clock-watcher, the cradled infant and the lost child; interpretation in "Hey Sailor" raises many questions that it leaves unanswered.[44]

"O Yes": The Context

The third story in *Tell Me a Riddle*, "O Yes," uses the rhetorical devices--repetition and refrain, catalogue and ellipsis, contrast and contradiction--incorporated into the chants and rhythms of religious liturgy. Here the twelve-year-old Carol, whom we heard at ten as a voice in Whitey's chorus, enters "the long baptism into the seas of human kind" (71) that the old sailor in the previous story was not far from completing. At the end of "Hey Sailor, What Ship?" Whitey is drowning in anonymity, survivor in a lifetime struggle against injustice and victim, finally, of addiction; in the opening episode of "O Yes," Carol is drowned into an awareness that "caring asks doing" (71). And both encounter the question of naming as event and process.

Again the opening sentence intimates the whole of what follows. It could be written, with a change of typography, as free verse:[45]

They are the only white people there,
sitting in the dimness of the Negro church that had once been a corner store,
and all through the bubbling,
swelling,
seething of before the services
twelve-year-old Carol clenches tight her mother's hand,
the other resting lightly on her friend
Parialee Phillips,
for whose baptism she has come. (48)

If the initial sentence parses well into parallel words, phrases, and clauses, the second paragraph is choreography:

> The white-gloved ushers hurry up and down the aisle, beckoning people to their seats. A jostle of people. To the chairs angled to the left for the youth choir, to the chairs angled to the right for the ladies' choir, even up to the platform, where behind the place for the dignitaries and the mixed choir, the new baptismal tank gleams--and as if pouring into it from the ceiling, the blue-painted River of Jordan, God standing in the waters, embracing a brown man in a leopard skin and pointing to the letters of gold:
>
> REJOICE
>
> D L
>
> O IS O
>
> G V
>
> E
>
> I AM THE WAY THE TRUTH THE LIFE
>
> (48-49)

The cadenced prose of the story's setting reaches a climax in a symbol of spirit and expectation: "At the clear window, the crucified Christ embroidered on the starched white curtains leaps in the wind of the sudden singing. And the choirs march in. Robes of wine, of blue, of red" (49).[46] The Lord of the Dance presides here, inviting participation through a synaesthesia of image and movement and song which will develop on three interchanging levels: the liturgy of the Negro church, the congregation's response, and the young white girl's experience of both.

The black family prompts them to rise: "Singing little Lucinda Phillips fluffs out her many petticoats; singing, little Bubbie bounces up and down on his heels" (49). The smaller children are from the start at home in worship supported by a hand-embroidered Christ and the God of wind and water, standing in a blue-painted river. As the pastor and choirs lead the liturgy, the adults prove to be even more fully so.

> *Any day now I'll reach that land of freedom.*
>
> *Yes, o yes.*
>
> *Any day now, know that promised land.* (49)

The old woman's "reconciled peace," the mother's desire "to total," and Whitey's "vision" become here a "promised land"; and the hearing, the blooming, the mariner's justice culminate in a guarantee of freedom and--the destination in all four works--of "home."

Carol, tapping with the swing of the music, suddenly stiffens at the anxious discovery that in the choir is another classmate, Eddie, who might see her there. While Parialee's reaction, "no harm or alarm," identifies her "new way of talking," it also belies the steadily pondering gaze she fixes on the front of the church every time Carol questions her. Their alternating joyous and foreboding moods are echoed in the soloist's lines: *"I know my robe will fit me well / I tried it on at the gates of Hell"* (50). Thus, the antiphonal singing and preaching develop, not in empty ritual, but as true liturgy--"the work of the people"--that is, as authentic reflection of a congregation's life in all its threat and possibility.

As Carol tries first to silence, and then to give form to the cacophony around her--"to search how many rhythms rock apart and yet are one glad rhythm" (50)--her preoccupation provides the point of view for most of what follows. The service moves through another kind of intertwining when Mr. Chairback Evans delivers first the invocation and then the announcements of the "mixed choir practice . . . Teen Age Hearts. . . . Messengers of Faith . . . and Mamboettes. . ." (50). Even messenger of the gods, Hermes himself, the trickster, riddle-maker, and patron of literary craft, would find interpretation of what follows elusive.

Carol is preoccupied, intermittently worrying about Eddie's "talking to her right in front of somebody at school"; drumming a rhythm on Parry's warm arm in the old game from grade school--"Parry, guess"; and responding to Parry's pondering of the platform by asking, "Are you scared--the baptizing?" (51). But Parry shakes her head, "slow and scornful," as "the barrette in her hair, sun fired, strikes a long rail of light," and continues to look straight ahead (51). The interweaving of liturgy--"O Lord, I couldn't find no ease"--with the alternating threat and support of those around her challenges Carol's private thoughts, and her anxious, restless mood combines with the mixed choir's assertion--"Ezekial saw that wheel of time / Every spoke was of human kind" (51)--in one rhythmic, ambiguous proliferation of unascribed voices.

The mixing of affirmation and contradiction continues into the beginning of the sermon, delivered by "the slim worn man in the pin-striped suit": "on the nature of God. How God is long suffering. Oh, how long he suffered. Calling role of the mighty nations, that rose and fell and now are dust for grinding the face of man" (51-52). As the creation story begins, and in the wake of this voice "of drowsiness and dream," Carol relives her own beginnings, "from dust to dust," long ago: "Parry warm beside her . . . in the classroom at Mann Elementary, . . . drenched in sun and dimness and dream. Smell and sound of the chalk wearing itself away to nothing, rustle of books, drumming tattoo of fingers on her arm: Guess" (52). Her own senses--seeing, hearing, smell, and touch--crowd out the liturgical setting as the memoried antiphonal games return, along with the perpetually rising and wearing away to dust of their old classroom rituals.

Suddenly Carol wakens from revery--*"Did someone scream?"*--as a new sound accents the steady rhythms. His tempo accelerating, the preacher evokes his congregation's "'*O* yes'"; but for Carol bewilderment deepens as she attempts to unwind from all the rest the screams and moaning, the fainting, thrashing bodies of those in transport with the spirit. She hears the beat rise as each charismatic worshipper receives gentle support from white-gloved ushers or women in white uniforms:

> "And God is Powerful," the preacher was chanting. . . . [S]coop out the oceans . . . scoop in the miry clay and create man. . . ." *"O yes."*
>
> "And when the earth mourned the Lord said, 'Weep not, for all will be returned to you, every dust, every atom. And the tired dust settles back, goes back. Until that Judgment Day. That great day.'" (52)

Carol accepts a fan offered by an usher as the preacher declaims, "'You think Satchmo can blow; you think Muggsy . . . Dizzy can blow?' . . . straining to an imaginary trumpet. . . . 'Nothing to Gabriel.'" Taking up the chant,

> *"Great Day, Great Day,"* the mixed choir behind the preacher rejoices:
>
> *When our cares are past*
> *when we're home at last . . .*

> . . . Looping, scalloping his voice--"grea-aaa-aat Daaaay." . . . Exultant spirals of sound. And Carol caught into it. . . . "Ohhhhhhhhhh, the rejoicing. After the ages immemorial of longing."(53-54)

Just short of conveying melody, the chanted rhythms compel response.

The looping and scalloping spirals of sound rise to another scream, "an awful thrumming sound with it, like feet and hands thrashing around, like a giant jumping of a rope" (54). The refrain still ringing around her, Carol watches:

> *"Great day."* And no one stirred or stared as the ushers brought a little woman out into the aisle, screaming and shaking, just a little shrunk-up woman not much taller than Carol, the biggest thing about her her swollen hands and the cascades of tears wearing her face. (54)

As an old woman, one for whom tending has filled a lifetime, expresses her sorrow and her faith, Parry, quite still, ponders the platform ahead. Sights, sounds, and feelings intensify with the rise and fall of the preacher's voice, traced in the looping of Lucy's bracelet, with the vibrancy of the chorus, echoed in the spiralling Christ that billows in the curtained window.

> Yes. He raised up the dead from the grave. He made old death behave. *Yes. Yes.* . . . *O Yes.* He was your mother's rock. Your father's mighty tower. And he gave us a little baby.
>
> . . . When you're friendless. . . . When you're fatherless. . . . When it seems you can't go on any longer, he's there. You can, he says, you can.
>
> . . . that burden--not for always will it be. . . . *O Yes.*
>
> Out of your suffering I will make you stand as a stone. A tried stone. Hewn out of the mountains of ages eternal.
>
> Out of the mire I will lift your feet from so much wandering. . . .
>
> *Yes* . . . wash them in the well your tears made. And I'll shod them in the gospel of peace and of feeling good. . . . *O Yes.*

Amidst "a trembling wavering scream" the sexuality of creation (from rock to tower, earth to water) becomes the passion of Christ; and "peace" and "feeling good" (as promise turns to narrative) a message of redemption:

They taken my blessed Jesus and flogged him to the woods. . . .

He never cried a word.

Powerful throbbing voices. Calling and answering to each other.

They taken my blessed Jesus and whipped him up the hill. . . .

He never cried a word.

Go tell the people the Savior has risen. . . .

And won't have to die no more. . . .

We won't have to die no more!

A single exultant lunge of shriek. . . . Thrashing. . . . Clapping. . . . [S]houts. . . . The piano whipping, whipping air to a froth. . . .

I once was lost who now am found

Was blind who now can see (54-56)

Out of the looping, scalloping, thrumming and thrashing of bracelets and skirts, of voices and bodies, and the leaping froth and foam of air, religious fervor combines testimony and emotional release that threaten Carol's innocence. She tries to concentrate on the fan with its pictured Jesus walking on water, to study it, to become it, to "make a wall around her. If she could make what was happening (*what* was happening?) into a record small and round to listen to far and far as if into a seashell--the stamp and rills and spiral all tiny (but never any screaming) . . . " (56). Thus Carol searches for a concrete, controllable image to contain the fearful eruption around her and chooses a convoluted shell--symbol of listening, of annunciation--an object to hold the subtleties of emotion and violence that need distancing.

Her reversion to the sea (later identified with her shell collection in the safe haven of her own room) finds an echo in the choir:

wade wade in the water

Jordan's water is chilly and wild

I've got to get home to the other side. . . .

The music leaps and prowls. Ladders of screaming. Drumming feet of ushers. . . . Lucy fluffs her skirts, loops the chain. . .; Bubbie sits and rocks. . . . (57)

Carol begs, "Mother, let's go home," but Helen, as if asleep, only holds her tighter as Alva rocks and chants beside her.

> *Sea of trouble all mingled with fire*
>
> *Come on my brethren it's time to go higher*
>
> *Wade wade*
>
> The voices in great humming waves, slow, slow . . . everyone swaying . . . a new cry, wild and open . . . the new known face from school (not Eddie), . . . the thrashing, writhing body . . . the ushers with the look of grave and loving support. . . .
>
> And now the rhinestones in Parry's hair glitter wicked; white hands of ushers, fanning, foam in the air, the blue-painted waters of Jordan swell and thunder; Christ spirals . . . and she is drowned under the sluice of the slow singing and the sway. (57-58)

The "long baptism into the seas of human kind" has begun for Carol in the elemental tensions of revelation and resistance: dust of earthy memory and the story of creation, thrashing bodies and the spiralling Christ, air whipped to froth and screams piercing through the crowded church, the fiery rail of Parry's barrette, "wicked," and the "tried stone" out of suffering. As if in the song and sway of surrender--*wade wade in the water*"--Carol succumbs, sinking beneath "the waves and the world." Her escape, however, is into "the deep cool green and the wrecks of what had been" (58)--a deflated, literal memory of a tour of Alva's work place at Hostess Foods, with its loading platform and chill room and grinding "convey" that must be kept oiled. She does not survive the rising excitement of the liturgy to witness the sacrament of Parialee's baptism, but enters instead her own kind of immersion, submitting to the "sea of trouble all mingled with fire" as she hears "'O help me, Jesus, . . . [d]on't take me away, life everlasting,'" a "new cry, wild and open" arising from "the new known face at school" (57). Thus Carol is led, vicariously, into the death by drowning which is the reality behind the ritual. In the curious setting of an assembly line, it is the application of Alva's anointing oil that starts slicers, wedgers, and convey rolling and grinding again, and Carol gulps bubbles of air only to surface into her family's car to

which she has been carried, victim of a fainting spell. "The light of day blazes up and Alva is holding a cup, saying: Drink this baby" (58)

Restored once more to the light and numbing air, Carol, offered the eucharistic ritual, completes of her "death by water" with mixed humor and pathos:

> "Lucyinda, if I had all your petticoats I could float. . . . Parry, I'm sorry I got sick and have to miss your baptism."
>
> "Don't feel sorry. I'll feel better you not there to watch. It was our mommas wanted you to be there, not me. . . . I'll come over to play kickball after. . . . Or bring the pogo." Old shared joys in her voice. "Or any little thing."
>
> In just a whisper: "Or any little thing. Parry. Good-bye, Parry." (59)

The girls' farewell (and sign of their separation) is interrupted by Alva, blaming herself for the uncompleted epiphany:

> "You'll feel better if you understand. . . ." "You not used to hearing what people keeps inside. . . . That was religion music, Carol. . . . "Not everybody feels religion in the same way. Some it's in their mouths, but some it's like a hope in their blood, their bones. . . . Out of they own life. And the preaching finding lodgment in their hearts. . . . [C]hurch is home. Maybe only place they can feel how they feel and maybe let it come out. So they can go on. . . . "Get happy we call it, and most it's a good feeling." (60)

Understanding, home, and "feeling good"--Tillie Olsen's terms for fulfillment--appear at the heart of Alva's attempt to help Carol "study about" her experience. But the screams and surging waves threaten her again, and she begs, "'We have to go home,'" her version of which is a room in her family's house, full of her collections and the familiar, secure identity of her childhood. Like the baptismal freedom, Alva's sermon has not yet "found lodgment" in Carol's heart.

The dramatic opening episode ends with Alva's own reverie and confession about a promising, but also uncompleted, new birth. It is another strange, surreal image, this time of her experience when Parry was born. She was only fifteen, in an unfamiliar city, and deserted by Parry's father, *"sin sick and never really believing, as still I don't believe all scorning"* (61). Waiting in a public clinic, she hears a voice--*"Fear not, I have loved you from the foundation of*

the world"--expression of the baptismal doctrine of prevenient grace, of God's love offered without petition or merit. In her dream, a child, holding a star-tipped parade stick leads Alva through Hell--*"Follow me"*--where she sees, in the gathering dark, trucks dumping bodies, *"and a convey line run, never ceasing with souls, weary ones having to stamp and shove them along, and the air like fire. Oh I never want to hear such screaming."* The child greases her feet, *"with the hands of my momma. . . . They shined like the sun was on them,"* and, anointed thus for her journey, Alva follows the leader with the parade stick (this time mounted on a motorbike). *"Eyes he placed all around my head,"* sign of prophetic vision as she travels, and she hears *"'Mama Mama you must help carry the world.'"* Thus sealed with the promise of a new heart, she is born again: on *"a path no bigger than my little finger. . . . The rise and fall of nations I saw. . . . And flew into a world of light, multitudes singing, Free, free, I am so glad"* (61).

From chaos and death to life in a literal new birth (this one signaled by light as well), and from oppression to freedom, Alva is reborn to a new family, and to the promise of a new people. Reflecting biblical liberation, Alva's dream parallels Tillie Olsen's own (indicting both individual and social injustice) and her insistence upon the relation between the two. While yet a sinner--*"sin-sick and never really believing,"* Alva says--she is led by a child-Christ through crucifixion and the terrors of hell to rebirth into a second life and a new freedom, to suffer (*"'help carry the world'"*) for the freeing of humankind. According to St. Augustine, baptism is the beginning of death, and death, the end of baptism. It is preparation for the suffering life, through the preenactment and facing of death, and for the deepening of the experience of life with its "one more river to cross"--but always also in Augustine, with assurance of final deliverance and freedom: *"Free, free, I am so glad."*

Thus Alva's recitative, coming as it does between Carol's yet uncompleted experience in the storefront church and its repercussions later, comments in alternative imagery upon the reality of baptism. Olsen's early participation in worship at a Negro church remains with her in the intricate detail of these descriptions. (See p. 144.)

The remaining episodes in "O Yes," conversations among her family, with Parry, and, later, as a result of reliving the event itself, all reflect Carol's experience. First, Helen's account

to her husband of the morning service at the Phillips' church is interposed with seventeen-year-old Jeannie's silent observations:

> "Something . . . deep happened. If only I or Alva had told her what it would be like. . . . But I didn't realize."
>
> You don't realize a lot of things, Mother, Jeannie said, but not aloud. . . . Enough to pull that kid apart two ways. . . .
>
> "I was glad she and Parry were going someplace together again. . . . What happened in a few months? . . . [H]ow close they were, the hours of make believe and dress up and playing ball and collecting. . . ." (62)

Finally Jeannie interrupts: "'Grow up, Mother. . . . Parialee's collecting something else now. Like her own crowd. Like jivetalk and rhythmandblues. Like teachers who treat her like a dummy and white kids who treat her like dirt'" (62-63). In a humanist image for the fall from grace, that radical separation for which baptism is believed to be the only rescue, Jeannie explains the "sorting" of black and white students. "'That's all through, her and Parialee Phillips, put away with their paper dolls. . . . They're going different places,'" which determines everything they do: " 'what you wear and how you wear it and who you eat lunch with and how much homework you do and how you act to the teacher and what you laugh at. . .'" (63).

Len suggests Carol and Parry may "'show it doesn't have to be that way,'" but Jeannie shouts back, "'They can't. They don't let you,'" while Helen reflects silently and with foreboding on *"How they sort"* (64). She remembers Carol's description of the girl in Low 7 homeroom who fought back as the teacher wiped lipstick off her mouth; of kids with no help at home who get hopelessly behind; and of Carol's new friends who refuse to come along if Parry is going (64).

Jeannie's accusation intensifies: "'If you think it's so goddam important why do we have to live here where it's for real; why don't we move to Ivy like Betsy (yes, I know, money) where it's the deal to be buddies, in school anyway, three coloured kids and their father's a doctor or judge.'" She insists, "'Just don't hurt Carol . . . there's nothing she can do about it'" (63-65).

Helen's head hurts, like Carol's in the car--"'I was trying to think'"--but Len is watching the scene on the street below and another, Edenic, image of unimpeded dialogue and dance:

> In the wind and shimmering sunset light. . . . The old synchronized understanding, Carol and Parry kick, catch, kick, catch. And now Parry jumps on her pogo stick (the last time), Carol shadowing her, and Bubbie, arching his body in a semicircle of joy, bounding after them, high, higher, higher. (65-66)

Reflecting the parade stick, the flooding waters, and the spiralling Christ, this sunset, in fact, confirms the change Jeannie has described. For in the months that follow, the "sorting" process continues, with Parry always too late to catch the ride to school, and too early returning in order to take care of Bubbie and Lucy. Walking the hill together or bending over homework at night is over also because they have different classes and teachers.

> After many months, Parry reappears, bringing homework to Carol who is ill--skimming up the stair, spilling books and binders . . . lookahere and wail. . . . [Y]our 'signments is inside; Miss Rockface says the teachers to write 'em cause I mightn't get it right all right.
>
> *But did not tell:* Does your mother work for Carol's mother? Oh, you're neighbors! Very well, I'll send along a monitor to open Carol's locker but you're only to take these things I'm writing down, nothing else. . . . (67)

Parry reports a catalogue of events from her present life in parallel with a quiet inventory of their past together:

> You really gonna mess with that book stuff? Sign on *mine* says do-not-open-until-eX-mas. . . . That Mrs. Fernandez doll she didn't send nothin' . . . wish I could get her but she only teaches 'celerated. . . . Vicky, Eddie's g.f. in Rockface office, she's on suspended for sure, yellin' to Rockface: you bitchkitty don't you give me no more bad shit. . . . Staring out the window as if the tree not there in which they had hid out and rocked so often. . . . Saturday night to Sweet's, Modernaires. Sounds. . . . Asking of Rembrandt's wary old face looking from the wall. How come (softly) you long-gone you. Touching her face to his quickly, lightly. . . . Tossing up and catching their year-ago, arm-in-

> arm graduation picture, replacing it deftly, upside down. . . . Twanging the paper fishkite, the Japanese windbell overhead, setting the mobile they had once made of painted eggshells and decorated straws to twirling and rocking. And is gone. (67-68)

The still dancing Parry, "sorted," confirms Jeannie's prediction, but also the old friendship, while Carol, by contrast, sleeps among "the furnishings of that world of childhood she no sooner learned to live in comfortably, then had to leave. . . . The dollhouse . . . ; the shell and picture card collections . . . ; the population of dolls . . ." (69).

In another interruption, a nearby radio blares

> . . . *of trouble all mingled with fire*
> *come on my brethern we've got to go higher*
> *Wade, wade. . . .*

And Carol, suddenly awake, bolts down the stairs, "shrieking and shrieking. 'Turn it off, Mother, turn it off.' Hurling herself at the dial and wrenching it so it comes off in her hand.

'Ohhhhh,' choked and convulsive, while Helen tries to hold her, to quiet" (69). A search among unspoken sortings of her own leaves Helen without understanding words: About the emotion of oppressed people--"thought of saying. And discarded"; about Alva's reference to hope, the church as home--"And discarded"; about the special history of the Negro people--"And discarded."

> And said nothing.
> And said nothing.
> And soothed and held. (70)

The potential litany, never celebrated, remains silent while Carol cries that teachers and kids don't like Parry "'when they don't even know what she's like,'" and that she is "not really her friend anymore" either. Helen continues with her own thoughts: "No news. Betrayal and shame. Who betrayed? Whose shame? Brought herself to say aloud: 'But may be friends again. As Alva and I are'" (70).

Carol, ignoring her mother's consoling prediction, describes instead how the girl Vicky who "got that way" in church is always in trouble, and now expelled. But she remembers what

happened to her in the service and "'I have to wonder. And hear . . . like I'm her, Mother, like I'm her.' Clinging and trembling. 'Oh why do I have to feel it happens to me too? . . . I want to forget . . . and not care,--like Melanie. . . . Oh why is it like it is. . .?'" (71).

Helen listens, searching again, and silently repeating

> *. . . caring asks doing. It is a long Baptism into the seas of humankind, my daughter. Better immersion than to live untouched. . . . Yet how will you sustain?*
>
> *Why is it like it is?*
>
> Sheltering her daughter close, mourning the illusion of the embrace.
>
> *And why do I have to care?* (71)

Thus "O Yes" ends, with its silences revealed only to the reader, in elliptical phrases that emphasize shame: the gulf between caring and doing, between love and liberation. In the closing lines of "Hey Sailor," Whitey thinks of Deeck and his room "where he can yell or sing or pound and Deeck will look on without reproach or pity or anguish" (47). And here Helen confronts her own need which "leapt and plunged for the place of strength that was not--where one could scream or sorrow while all knew and accepted, and gloved and loving hands waited to support and understand" (71). This need for hands that understand, with or without words, reveals how concern for human anguish, which they initially assert, is ultimately contradicted in both "Hey Sailor" and "O Yes." For the values advocated in each story finally convict of betrayal those who try to practice them. The family through whom the stories are told is caught in perpetuating the distress and injustice they deplore--with their attention to the clock ("Motor by which this house runs now"), through the achievements they promote, and, ironically, through the very pressure they impose on their children to be faithful to humane values. As Jeannie insists, "'What do you want of that poor kid anyway? Make up your mind. Stay friends with Parry--but be one of the kids. Sure. Be a brain--but not a square. Rise on up, college prep, but don't get separated'" (65). Is the family unequal, then, to supporting or understanding? Does it, in fact, extenuate "the long baptism into the seas of humankind" that should happen once-and-for-all but, instead, must occur again and again, in personal as well as in collective history? "'I

have to wonder. And hear . . . like I'm her, Mother. . . . Oh why do I have to feel it happens to me too?'" (71).

Tillie Olsen does not resolve the dilemma in either story. As in "I Stand Here Ironing," the most sympathetic character, the mother, falters, with neither understanding nor care sufficient to the loss revealed and lamented in the text: "'You're not talking about Carol at all, are you, Jeannie? Say it again. I wasn't listening. I was trying to think'" (65). In "Hey Sailor," the lights in Whitey's haven on the crest of the far hill "blur with the myriad others that stare at him so blindly . . . [before] he goes down." And in "O Yes," the home that has opposed those who "don't let you" be different, finally cannot encompass, not only the difference that for a time it has welcomed from outside, but also the questions and contrasts it has spawned in its own children: "mourning the illusion of the embrace" (71).

Baptism (which was also Olsen's original title for the third story in the collection) is, as Augustine said, the beginning of our death, and death, the end of our baptism. And, according to Alva's church, without radical acceptance of that experience, no one, it seems, can be free--

Shout, brother, shout

We won't have to die no more!

. . .

I once was lost who now am found

Was blind who now can see

--at home, reconciled, "feeling good," "more than . . . helpless," named. To understand requires something beyond Enlightenment's rational attentiveness. The "convoluted ear" is at least part gift; some traditions call it "grace," which, Augustine adds, "has two lovely daughters, anger and courage." And its work, through successive generations of a family (and, Tillie Olsen implies, "from the beginning"), may be that mystery about which "Death deepens the wonder" (125).

The Work: Understanding as Comprehension

Emily Dickinson enjoins the writer to "Tell the truth but tell it slant,"[47] in a succinct definition of metaphorical expression. Through the quality of indirection, the familiar question or problem, viewed "in a crooked way," becomes unfamiliar--strange--as if seen for the first time

or overheard in passing. Ricoeur calls this form of language-play reaching most effective "mimesis" through "mythos," as the Greek playwrights practiced it (68). Thus the fictional plot becomes evocative model for the heuristic imagination and, through creative images, names things in new ways that reach beyond the limits of current comprehension fixed by the language of present analysis, toward perspectives "not dreamed of." Through the analysis of Tillie Olsen's rhetorical techniques, these slant-wise approaches to "mimesis" become available as clues to the reading of her text.

Initially Ricoeur states that metaphorical thinking draws its suggestive quality and power from the symbolic level of awareness that connects expression with what is neither as yet apprehended nor understood and, therefore, articulated. From psychotherapy, he cites dreams as constituting such an interplay of forces--"a kind of palimpsest, riddle, or hieroglyph"--that resist any reduction to linguistic processes, yet cannot be read anywhere else than in the dream or symbolic text (59-60). Ricoeur calls such language "bound" to forces in life not yet available to "readable" forms, but testifying to "the primordial rootedness of Discourse in Life" (59). Metaphors, in their gathering and scattering throughout a work of fiction, give clues to the direction this "not-yet in the now" is taking toward expression of "new ways of being"--and of thinking about old problems, about unanswered riddles.

Within Tillie Olsen's fiction, the imperative "to understand" typifies this search for clarifying and freeing expression. At the opening of "I Stand Here Ironing," Emily's counsellor has asked her mother to "[h]elp me understand . . . a youngster who needs help," to which the narrator replies, "And when is there time to remember, to sift, to weigh, to estimate, to total" (9). Emily herself appears at the close of the story, chiding her mother--"Aren't you ever going to finish the ironing?"--with another reference to the perpetual effort, never completed, at restoring form and clarity to the human wrinkle (19). In "Hey Sailor, What Ship?" Whitey's struggle for identity is reflected in Helen's characteristic phrase, evoked repeatedly--"to understand" (43-47) --but is finally negated in the closing images, with "the death of the brotherhood" (45) and the windows "that stare at him so blindly" (47). Of Carol's fainting spell amid the emotional power of the Christian liturgy in "O Yes," Alva says, "'You'll feel better if you understand,'" and attempts to define the church as "'Maybe the only place they can feel how they feel and maybe let

it come out'" (60). But for Carol the "screaming and waves" remain incoherent as she begs to go home before Alva's "invocating" has "found lodgment" in her heart. Later, the momentary return of Parry and Carol's "old synchronized understanding" (65) and of Helen's admitted need "for the place of strength . . . to support and understand" are unequal to Carol's insistent question: "'Why do I have to care?'" (71).

Finally, Helen pleads in "Hey Sailor": "You can learn from him. . . . Jeannie, I care you should understand. . . . You've got to understand" (43). It is the same Jeannie, a dozen years older, who finally, in the last passages of the collection, responds to her grandmother's query that has gathered momentum, page by page:

> Heritage. . . . To look back and learn what humanizes--this to teach. (90)
>
> Everywhere unused the life And who has meaning?" (108)
>
> In one minute she killed, before my eyes. . . .
>
> All that happens, one must try to understand. (113)

From the commitment of the mothers, however ambiguous, in the earlier stories to the faithfulness of Jeannie, the granddaughter, in its final passages, Tillie Olsen's work enacts that effort at understanding. And it is to the task of understanding that she invites her reader. This search must be conducted, because it is intentionally addressed, on two levels; that is, the characters' struggle over how to live gives the reader clues, as well, to solving the riddle of interpretation of the work as a whole.[48]

Therefore, in a concluding discussion of *Tell Me a Riddle*, analysis of the struggle within the text, the oppositions and resolutions of the "narrative logic," leads to examination of the overall work and how it overcomes "the radical non-communicability of the lived experience as lived" (Ricoeur 16), or how it communicates, writer to reader ("holds in common" between them the sense of the text). In the process, a concept of discourse can develop that confirms the possibility of dialogue, defined phenomenologically as "an event which connects two events, that of speaking [writing] and that of hearing [reading]."[49] According to Ricoeur's analysis, it is "to this dialogical event that understanding as meaning is homogeneous" (16). The test of interpretation, and the clue to Tillie Olsen's riddle, lie in the direction of this parallel analysis of narrative logic and textual meaning.

Groups of metaphorical images emerge from a reading of Tillie Olsen's work: liturgy and the dance, music, graphic art, poetry, mime and oratory as interpretation; the earth, the mother, the child, and family as generative form; hands, feeding, and water of springs and seas as sources of nurture, withholding/giving, and continuity; fire, air, circles and reversals as symbolic shape and direction for meaning. An additional concept that ties the four stories together is the literal reference and powerfully suggestive allusion to home. As a place to be created ("Ironing" and "O Yes"), and to be within ("Hey Sailor" and "Tell Me"), home implies, in each of the stories, successively, nurture and psychological support, recognition and just treatment, strength and acceptance, and attentive listening and teaching. On the other hand, its denial results in interruptions of growth, of identity, of rescue and freedom, and of understanding. Deprived, rejected, excluded, and wandering victims of homelessness are the embodiment of the failure to love and to trust in Olsen's characterizations: a neglected child, an outcast derelict, a demeaned race or class, a deprecated sex, and a discounted generation--all are the result of the withholding of a home. And those for whom home appears commonplace are thus deprived of the experience of inclusiveness as its founding reality. For home-making and -keeping to flourish, Tillie Olsen suggests, children must not only have a home, but lost wanderers must be welcomed home, racial and economic difference must be included as part of home, and contrasts of sex and generations must become reconciled within home.

Signs of this metaphor for acceptance and belonging do appear in each story: "Shoogily" sets the seal of Emily's tenuous claim to identity with home and "comfort" (18); "What Ship?" sounds the note of suspense as Whitey begs, "Oh feeling good, come back, come back" (39) and later returns to Deeck "where he can yell or sing or pound . . . without reproach or pity or anguish" (47). For Alva, "'church is home. Maybe the only place they can feel how they feel and maybe let it come out. So they can go on. And it's all right'" (60). When Carol asks, "'Oh why do I have to feel it happens to me?'" Helen's "own need leaps and plunges for the place of strength that was not--where one could scream or sorrow while all knew and accepted, and gloved and loving hands waited to support and understand" (71). Finally, the old woman's repeated "'Let us go home'" turns to "'Where *is* my home?'" (115) and to her promise to "go back to where she was born," as the old man also comes back "to help" (125).

In all four stories the "reconciled peace" of home is destroyed--because they "could not afford the soil of easy growth" (20); because of "words that hurt" (42) and "the body that was betraying him" (47); because "'They don't let you'" (63) and abandon you to the "[b]etrayal and shame . . . of 'sorting'" (70); because, after pleading over and over, "'Let us go home,'" the question finally surfaces, "'Coward . . . Betrayer . . . Where *is* my home?'" (115), and is answered with "the bereavement and betrayal . . . sheltered--compounded through the years" (120). The failure of home--as nurture, acceptance, justice, and fulfillment--signals also the failure of relationship and of love.

But betrayal goes deeper than words, addiction, or "sorting"; than the loss of access to a house and of a "sense of mattering." A young mother's too anxious love for "a child seldom smiled at" (20); a family's devotion to the clock; a brotherhood that no longer "had to live for each other" (45); a young girl's confession, "'And I'm not really her friend any more'" (70); the "'hid it from me'" of an old woman's withholding (118); and the "'All your life you have run'" of an old man's desertion (115): all these acts of denial block the events of shared discourse that Ricoeur defines as communication. The failure of home, in fact, distorts identity and subverts the growth that dialogue can induce.

However, as strong as the themes of desertion, and of the death of relationship, are in Tillie Olsen's realism, the struggle to overcome betrayal and separation persists in her presentations. Emily and her mother *do* survive, together, in spite of economic and psychological deprivation, and the destructive pressures of impersonal institutions. Emily's mimicry, comic relief for her over-worked mother, becomes convincing artistic expression that communicates her inner to her outer world. Whitey's stories, songs, and oratory, though silenced as he "goes down," will remain with the family as *"speech in thy ears, fragrance and color, / Light and shout and loved song"* (42). Carol retreats to "that world of childhood she no sooner learned to live in comfortably, then had to leave," but the "trouble all mingled with fire" calls her again to "Wade, wade. . ." (69). For as Helen observes, *Better immersion than to live untouched. . ."* (71). And the old woman abandons her plea for peace and faces a recapitulation of her life, affirming her efforts to learn, to teach, and to nurture, while the old man comes back and tends, helping death release her to her promise, out of his own "reconciled solitude."

A community of support contributes to each of these reversals: a neighbor offers Emily's mother insight, and she herself encourages her daughter to test her talent; songs and poetry, the brotherhood, and a surrogate family supply Whitey's ultimate trip card; Alva, Helen, and their friendship offer a model for Carol's fluctuating loyalties; and a Tolstoyan and her surrogate together teach Eva how to die. Furthermore, the family's uncertain future strengthens with the fourth generation. In contrast to the first story's prediction--"all that is in her will not bloom" (20)--Jeannie eventually does respond to her mother's injunction, "'You can learn from him . . . I care you should understand,'" (43) although in another context. And besides protesting on behalf of her sister, "'What do you want of that poor kid anyway?'" (65), she also develops the capacity to reassure--"it is all right. She promised me. . ." (125).

In the title story, Jeannie emerges as the thread, the continuity within the family narrative. Though (as Emily) she has "set her seal" of loyalty and identity, in "Hey Sailor," she is embarrassed by the vulgarity of a "Howard Street wino" who may have saved her father's life in the strike of 1934, but who "doesn't belong here." After hearing Helen caution, "Remember how good he's been to you. . . . You can learn from him" (43), still she abandons "his long ago greeting . . . *Hey Sailor, what ship?*" and, "silent and shrunken in her coat," is the last to see him slip away into the fog (47).

Then she reemerges in "Tell Me Riddle" to greet her grandparents at the destination of their journey, a public health nurse with the skills to settle her grandmother into her final winter. And she soon becomes, not only facilitator, but surrogate Lisa for the old woman who again "rides to books," even though "it is winter." Finally, Jeannie even leaves her job to reconsider art school and to express the attachment she has formed--"(Shameful the joy, the pure overwhelming joy from being with her grandmother;" (116)--with hands, both caring and artistic.

Even without the Edenic "soil of easy growth," a forgiving "marriage" with Whitey, or a baptism "into humankind" shared with Carol, Jeannie surfaces from her own immersion "in the seas of trouble" as a kind of child of grace--"baptized." It is she who coaxes her grandfather to laugh, who reminds him, "'She needs you, Grandaddy. . . . Isn't that what they call love?'"

(115). As a consequence, he tends "with his knotty fingers as Jeannie had taught" (122), and, glimpsing Jeannie's sketch of "their hands, his and hers, clasped," does not run, but stays "as if he had been instructed" (124). Finally, at the end, when "they had to fight to hold her down," it is Jeannie who comforts him: "'Grandaddy don't cry. She is not there, she promised me. On the last day. . .'" (124-25).

With the image she has sketched, out of "the peace, the serenity that breathed," Jeannie calls the old man back--like a drum, beaten; like a chandelier, hanging and burning (83)--to "help her poor body to die" (125). To this embattled old couple, she is "the not yet in the now." The beloved high phrases--"These things shall be"--translate concretely in Jeannie as liberator to each of them, releasing Eva to a promise and David to loyalty. In her, all the major metaphors of the story come to focus--hands, art, the child, and the music that knocks--and she is the fulfillment of her grandmother's wish: "This to teach." Lennie and Helen's humane commitments informed Jeannie's rebellion so that, through her art, the old man is convinced to tend; through her hands, the old woman is released to die; and through her relationships, Jeannie hears, sees, and expresses her own humanity for the freeing of those she loves.

Paul Ricoeur includes in his *Interpretation Theory* the structuralist analysis of the text as a world in itself. Having completed the initial reading and "guess" about the content and direction of the work, its genre and multiple perspectives, the critic is to follow E. D. Hirsch's procedures for judging one view as "more valid" than its alternatives, and then locate, between Hirsch's inclusive judgment and the final interpretation process (or appropriation), a structural reading, with its explanation of narrative logic. In place of the more familiar polarizing of contrasting approaches, Ricoeur employs each in his inclusive claim to the transforming nature of the text.

Thus, as the critical process develops, Ricoeur utilizes the terminology and methods of structural analysis. By locating synchronically the units of action within a narrative in order to expose their structural sequence, he discovers also the switch-points which determine the direction of a work. Methods of deconstruction thereby become, in Ricoeur's approach to criticism, not the denial of all possible meaning (which deconstructionist theory is often seen to represent), but a way to uncover the so-called "boundary situations," the oppositions that

constitute the ultimate reference of a work--the aporias or silences that motivated its invention initially, and that tend, finally, toward their own progressive mediation. For, having lost, through the distanciation of the written text, its originating event--that is, both the author's intention and the audience to which it was addressed--the critic uses its structural form as guide, within the autonomy of the work, to the problem of reference, or "what the text talks about." Such deconstructionist questioning not only reveals the tension or query motivating a narrative, but also uncovers its effort at a new conception, literally a breakdown (of old concepts)--a death --for the birth of what has so far been inexpressible in the familiar language of the genre and culture that evoked it. This "sense" of the work--the not-yet-in-the-now--becomes, then, for Ricoeur, the direction of its reference for whatever audience it addresses, in whatever circumstance (84-88). Applying this method of analysis to "Tell Me a Riddle" can open up its fundamental questions and ultimate direction.

The old woman names her purpose early, and repeatedly, in her story: "To smash all ghettos that divide us--not to go back, not to go back--this to teach" (90). But she also queries: "What I intended and did not?" (97), "Everywhere unused the life And who has meaning?" (108). Though the "loftier race" is promised in the nineteenth-century hymn, she recognizes the tragic reversal and defeat of its hope, through her own, as well as the world's, destructive agency. David has it right: "'Words, words,' he accused, 'and what human beings did *you* seek around you, Mrs. Live Alone, and what humankind think worthy?'" (119). The boundary situations that found these stories, the questions they pose, challenge both the means and the motivation toward economic and social justice, political and domestic peace. The earth is split, at the root; water and fire drown and burn without redeeming; and "millions have no graves--save air" (114). The old woman carries within her consciousness, as she embodies metaphorically, the real heritage of the century. Betrayal is her familiar, not justice "*on earth and fire and sea and air*" (120). And she dies unreconciled--struggling--but having gone, after all, courageously "back."

One clue to the direction this frustrated question takes in Tillie Olsen's work is the fact, already observed, that although the issues of personal and social justice go unresolved in the unspoken stories of repressed lives--the mother's, Whitey's, Carol's and Parry's, the old

woman's--still Lennie and Helen have taught their children to challenge the barriers of class, condition, race, and age. Thus, Jeannie eventually becomes Lisa to her grandmother, offering Eva another "ride . . . to books": "'At night, past dogs that howled, terrible dogs . . . in the snows of winter to the road. . . '" (112). Not only in the night of her death, "to the road," when "the agony was perpetual" (124), but also as she shares her days, the stories of her life and her awareness of life itself with her granddaughter, Eva finds a listener who hears that the music "knocks" (114). Though communication is not completed in "I Stand Here Ironing," "Hey Sailor, What Ship," in "O Yes" and "Tell Me a Riddle," Jeannie's capacity to hear and to tell it straight, in the earlier stories, meets its positive subject in Eva, her dying patient, her grandmother, her progenitor and ultimate reference--in "the joy . . . peace . . . serenity that breathed" (116)--and understanding occurs.

Through many repetitions and refrains, through catalogues of experience that elude totalling, the contrasts that ended in contradictions have turned to positive reversal and recognition in Jeannie. Rejection of Whitey and her condemnation of hope for Carol and Parry become instead, in the final story, creative understanding through love for her "darling Granny." Jeannie, the nurse and the artist, lends hands and imagination to the caring and interpreting that help Eva to die, taking her dead with her (117)--the martyrs, Davy, the slaves, the 78,000, the children, the betrayed, Lisa.

In another reversal, the story of the family's lives, chronicled in current detail, in biographical perspective, and in historical and cosmic dimensions, leaves the old couple first forebearing, then resentful and withdrawing--quarreling--and, finally, condemning as it uncoils, springs, and releases its question. The old woman regresses from the high-sounding phrases of Hugo, and of a romantic hymn, to "cheap thread," "bread, day-old," and a "soup bone"; and she retraces the claw and crawl of her evolutionary past while the old man waivers over whether to stay and tend or run again. However, caring does persist in the stories--the mother's ironing, Whitey's hands that gloss the bookcase (46), the "peaceful wreck[s] holding hands" (31), the white-gloved hands "waiting to support and understand" (71), and the "have I ten hands?" of Eva's constancy (123). Furthermore, a more radical reversal underlies this prevailing support-beyond-accusation.

To illustrate creative deconstruction, Ricoeur cites the well-known analysis of the Oedipus myth by Claude Levi-Strauss: "[T]wo incompatibles each contradict themselves in the same way that tends toward their mediation," or "contradictory relationships are identical inasmuch as they are both self-contradictory in a similar way" (84). This now familiar reading of the Greek myth, which offers insight into the narrative logic of the Sophoclean tragedy, is applicable to Tillie Olsen's title story as well. The old woman's relationship with the old man results in not speaking, in hiding the depth of her thought. By withdrawing to an attitude of disrespect for his garrulous insensitivity and cowardice, she betrays her covenant with him. In his relationship with her, the old man speaks in mockery, belittling her views and running away in betrayal of her strengths and her vulnerability.[50] Thus joined in their mutual failure toward one another, both need to forgive and to be forgiven. (See note 50.) At the end of the story, only he is left to recognize and acknowledge the truth of their condition, and he does so, with Jeannie's help, not only by giving up his accusations, but also by mourning "the bereavement and betrayal he had sheltered--compounded through the years--hidden even from himself" (120). And by crossing over to argue her part--"'And are there no other children in the world?'" (121)--and to defend her integrity--"'Still you believed? You lived by it? These Things Shall Be?'" (123)--he gains the courage not to run, but tends "with his knotty fingers" (122), sees Jeannie's sketch as "shield against the monstrous shapes of loss, of betrayal, of death," and takes the old woman's hand "back into his" (124). At the close of her life, ironically, it is the stoic who babbles and the babbler who listens, who turns and tends, who comes back and helps, who holds . . . alone, and in reconciled solitude, for them both.

Thus, the structural reversals in all the stories suggest what may be a key "to understand" what it is "to be in the world": the imperative to stay open, to go back and inquire, and to remain faithful to the struggle. These stories also end, for me, in a catharsis of pity and fear, pity at the lost chance for David and Eva to speak to one another and to be heard, and fear for the continuing quarrel among the Evas and Davids who are representative of all human conflict--immediate and domestic, systemic and tenacious, cosmic in the dimensions of their hopes and failures: "To have come all this way not to teach?" The work calls the reader to such pity and fear, but not to despair.

Ricoeur confirms that the critic cannot reconstruct the original event of creating a work of art (the intentional fallacy) or recover its reception by the audience to which it was originally addressed (affective fallacy); but through the sense, objectified in the autonomous text, a link can be found between the two "horizons," writer's and reader's, engendering a new event in the act of comprehension. Ricoeur describes this process, not as grasping the text in the interests of one's own limited self-understanding (projection), nor as taking possession of it by means of cultural preconceptions (the hermeneutic circle), but as a moment of dispossession. If the winsomeness of the narrative's myth, its indirect metaphorical modeling, succeeds, then egotistical possession is diverted by the dispossession of the ego--by disclosure--in an invitation to new self-understanding. According to Ricoeur's theory, a text that in its universalized sense has the power of disclosing a world (described in phenomenological analysis) can also "give a self to the ego" as interpretation becomes understanding that transforms (91-95).

Book Twelve of the *Confessions* of St. Augustine begins

> In this poverty-stricken life of mine, O Lord, my heart, smitten by the words of your sacred Scriptures, is greatly exercised by them. For the most part, this poverty of human understanding is plentiful in words, because inquiry says more than discovery, demanding is longer than obtaining, and one hand that knocks is more active than the hand that receives. We hold the promise; who shall break it. (258)

I believe Tillie Olsen's *Tell Me a Riddle* is the work of a humanist mystic who, through the strict economy of artistic means, enquires deeply and powerfully into the possibility of such promise. Initially adopting Romanticism's metaphors for the quest--the stages of life, the road, the journey--she deepens their suggestibility through symbols--the four elements, hands, circles, the child, and home--and the additional rhetorical strategies--repetition, catalogue, and contradiction --to enhance the telling of the riddle in four stories that become a unified tale. All four are rooted in a commitment to human liberation--political, religious, economic, or domestic--among all classes and conditions of life, races, creeds, male and female, young and old, husband and wife. The means to such liberation are, for her, hearing and giving just recognition to "the other." But she makes clear that to reconcile involves differences, not only of nature and opinion, of nations

and systems, but also of lifetimes and of generations, as deep as the earth itself and as wide as "the determining, the crucial sky" (92).

The ancient Chinese symbol for love combines two characters, one for "breathing," the other "into the heart." To Tillie Olsen, life is an old couple quarreling. And as they do so, they confront around them the disappointment of their dreams for liberation--in the history of their original and adopted countries, in the nurturing of their children, in the arrangements of their culture, in their treatment of one another, and, finally, within each one of them--in the hopes that have kept them alive, but which they have failed to share fully. But the quarrel that splits the earth between them and cleaves the sky leads also to a promise: through their listening and enquiring, staying within the struggle, the mystery will deepen, and also the promise--of communication--like flutes "that tremble in the air."

Tillie Olsen's vision of life split at the source, in the garden, from its primordial beginnings, calls our longing for a reconciled solitude not to some gentle peace, but to the brink of our own and the world's death: "We'll destroy ourselves?" (108). For "the tearing shook even to the children" (72), "to a little girl on the road of the village. . . " (125). At the close of Olsen's stories, "Death deepens the wonder," but it is left to life, and its metaphors in art, to "breathe into the heart" and to continually reopen the question. When the child asked, "Tell me a riddle, Grammy" (94), the old woman answered that she knew none, but she was wrong. For as the artist of her own life, she has told the riddle, faithfully and well, and a child has listened.

The Work: Interpretation as Transformation

The final stage of Paul Ricoeur's interpretation theory calls for appropriation of the narrative logic of a work of art in the context of current awareness, that is in relation to the reader's questions about how to live in an ambiguous world. For the old woman, her husband's mocking claim early in her story--"'[Y]ou scratched in your dirt with the chickens and thought Olshana was the world'" (79)--turns into the sign and seal of her identity. For those thatched roofs of her native village--"sun round, moon round"--to whose rounded sight and sound she chooses to return at the close of her life, do contain and encompass the world for Eva. The old man had offered her instead TV "Wonders" (79), but "Death deepens the wonder," finally, over

Olshana's "eye-round" rooftops. From the earth of louse-ridden hunger and poverty to the sound of flutes that "tremble in the air," Eva perceives the compass and conceives the compassion of a lifetime and, perhaps, of a world.

Ricoeur defines interpretation as being grasped by "the referential power of the text" or by "the power of disclosure implied in [the writer's] discourse beyond the limited horizon of his own existential situation" (92-93). On the basis of distanciation and atemporalization, "the world horizon of the reader is fused with the world horizon of the writer. And the ideality of the text [its sense] is the mediating link in this process. . . ." Furthermore, through the universality of the sense, a work escapes both its author and its original audience; thus, writing becomes "the paradigmatic mediation between two word-events" (93).

By this definition of interpretation, the text becomes metaphor for the act of communication, of "holding in common." Like Ricoeur's definition, "as if, through the classical association of unlikes, the two oppositions in the comparison [i.e., horizons of writer and reader] 'catch' something of one another's incompatible quality, and, within the proximity of their limited similarity [the "sense" of the text as universal, "the same"], and the resulting claim on one another [in the shared text] nag, tease, and taunt the resulting tension [the secret, riddle] into a larger comprehension," of understanding through appropriation (see pp. 57-58).

Finally, appropriation of the meaning of a text by any given reader does not imply, for Ricoeur, merely subjection to his or her capacities and incapacities for understanding. Instead of being sole captive to the personal and cultural projections of the hermeneutic circle, the meaning of a text, according to Ricoeur, lies in its "project of a world, the pro-position of a mode of being in the world that the text opens up in front of itself by means of its non-ostensive [universalized beyond immediate context] references." To the questioning reader, subject to the patterns and codes of his or her own cultural preconceptions, the metaphorical twist of a work of art, "telling it slant," offers "a new capacity for knowing himself [in its] disclosure of new modes of being" (93-94). That is, if the reference of a text, or what is "made one's own" is not something mental, not the intention of another subject, presumably hidden behind the text, but the project of a world, . . . then it is not the reader who primarily projects himself. The reader rather is

enlarged in his capacity of self-projection by receiving a new mode of being from the text itself (94).

Ricoeur reiterates that such appropriation, accordingly,

> . . . ceases to appear as a kind of possession, as a way of taking hold of things; instead it implies a moment of dispossession of the egoistic and narcissistic ego. . . . the work of the kind of universality and atemporality emphasized in explanatory [structualist] procedures. And this universality in its turn is linked to the disclosing power of the text as distinct from any kind of ostensive reference. Only the interpretation that complies with the injunction of the text, that follows the "arrow" of the sense and that tries to think accordingly, initiates a new self-understanding. In this self-understanding, I would oppose the self, which proceeds from the understanding of the text, to the ego, which claims to precede it. It is the text, with its universal power of world disclosure, which gives a self to the ego. (94-95)

Eva has read the text of her world, from Olshana to Olshana, beyond its ostensive and immediate references, and into its universalized meaning: in the repetitions and refrains of inquiry, the catalogues and ellipses of daily struggle, in the contrasts and contradictions of a life-long encounter, and in metaphorical translations of the symbols of creation and of history. In the process, her days, her biography, and the world's story have reversed for her and resound with disclosures, about possibilities for a new kind of future and for a self emerging beyond her limited ego. In doing so, she has solicited the attention of her family, only one of whom heard with her "the music that knocked." But because Jeannie engaged her grandmother's discourse, it was freed from its long silence and transformed the life of its chief antagonist. For the old man also caught the "universalized sense of the text" as he found himself the interpreter of Eva's words--"stained words, that on her working lips came stainless" (122)--and of her long-hidden life, within a new context (his own). Again, in the same terms as Ricoeur's definition of metaphor, "through the classical association of unlikes . . . two oppositions [the worlds of Eva and David] 'catch' something of one another's incompatible quality [of "the other,"] and, within the proximity of their limited similarity [as finite human beings], and the resulting claim on one

another [as man and wife, as family], nag, tease, and taunt the resulting tension [the quarrel qua "riddle"] into a larger comprehension [in a reconciled peace that is not passive, but both caring and doing]." It is in this sense that metaphor becomes symbol for the interpretation of the book, for the role of the book as art itself, and for life underlying them both.

So, also, according to the narrative logic of "Tell Me a Riddle," and of its context in the collection that it names, are the widening range of its readers offered from within it, not self-projection and confirmation of their personal and historical world-view, but "the power of disclosing a world"--and "a new way to be." Struggle with hands, words, artistic means, and the demanding advent of the child will continue to challenge the questioning reader, but insight about rivals in the struggle--that "incompatibles each contradict themselves in the same way" and that "contradictory relationships are identical inasmuch as they are both self-contradictory in a similar way"--are offered as explanation through the "mythos" that "draws together contradictions in order to overcome them" (84).

Whether we hear or not, according to Tillie Olsen, depends upon our convoluted ear, on the enlargement of our concept of "home," and on our sense of connectedness with and hope for the reversal of the world's deprivation and suffering--in short, upon our readiness to read the transforming metaphors of our own experience.

The Olshana of starved humanity is, after all, the world, and it is to the "promise" of returning to that struggle that Tillie Olsen calls the readers of her text with her metaphorical imperative--"Tell me a riddle." In the process, "how she does it" reflects upon "what she does," for the catharsis of this tragedy lies, beyond the passages read, in the world that calls for the "convoluted ear" and for "hands enough."

A wedding may imply patriarchy, as Adrienne Rich observed, but such matings and covenants are one of the forms for continuity of dialogue--of saying and hearing in discourse--that humanizes both personal and communal life. It was a marriage bed, rooted in the earth, that confirmed for Penelope Odysseus' identity when he returned from years of war. For Eva and David, those roots split and tore the earth between them, and "the tearing shook even to the children . . ." (73) whom they had also conceived. I think it is to the child, in particular, that Olsen returns in her "universalized sense" of what matters. Is not the question implied in the title

of the collection, and in all her work as an artist, sounded in the voice of a child?--"Tell me a riddle, Grammy?"[51]

The transformation of antagonists, personal and familial, historic and cosmic, is ultimately in the service of new life. Never completed, the struggle for reconciled peace points to "a little girl on the road of the village where she was born. . . . It is a wedding . . . ," and the child waits, listening, to hear the riddle told again.

CHAPTER V

OTHER CRITICS / OTHER WORKS

An account of her central work, *Tell Me a Riddle*, from the perspective of Paul Ricoeur's *Interpretation Theory* leads to questions about the reception of Tillie Olsen's writings, both fiction and non-fiction, and about the biographical setting for her invention. As background for the approaches taken to Olsen studies by her most serious critics, a review of some key developments in twentieth-century theory is also useful. The analyses by David Tracy and Richard Palmer that follow offer, therefore, a context for the survey of Tillie Olsen's other works and of their critical reception, as well as clarification about the place of the present study in overall Olsen criticism.

Tracy and Palmer: Context for Criticism

In an unpublished draft of *Pluralism and Ambiguity,* David Tracy outlines the development of certain contemporary philosophical theories of explanation and their analyses of the radical plurality of relationships among language, knowledge, and reality. In the movements that resulted from this "linguistic turn," all human enquiry is a hermeneutic enterprise in which the viewer, the world, and the language engaging their relationship are, *a priori*, interpretation, or "always already there." The facticity of positivism, the "self" or "genius" of romanticism, and the idea of language as "given" (mere instrumentality) are all reassessed as reflections of social and historical influences; in the process, fact becomes "verifiable possibility"; the autonomous self, a "decentered ego"; and instrumental language (through which the experience of fact and of self is conveyed), the "always already there." In Heidegger's classic phrase, "language is the house of being," constitutive of all we know and all we are. Thus "[r]eality is neither 'out there' nor 'in here.'

> Reality is produced or constituted by the interaction between a "text and an interpreter in all conversation, all argument, and all scientific experiment. . . ."

> We do not first experience or understand some "reality" and then find words to name that understanding through ostensive definitions. We understand in and through the languages available to us. . . . (73)

Tracy observes that this uncovering of history and society as present in the verifiable fact, decentered ego, and lingustic character of all understanding constituted an "interruption" that has called in question the nature of language, knowledge, and reality, interrelating and relativizing all three. One frequent result has been a passivity of analysis, according to Tracy's description, that gives "normative status to one mode of discourse above all others--'silence'"(79). If all understanding is, in fact, linguistically influenced, sensitive waiting for "disclosures from 'Language'" can become the preferred mode of existence, while using language in interpretation, decision, and action remains suspect and contingent upon its reception as revealer (77).

In Tracy's terms, awareness of "the ineradicable plurality among ways of being in the world was the singular contribution of Wittgenstein. . . . The plural character within every disclosure of language as at once disclosure and concealment, revealing and withdrawing, was the singular achievement of the later Heidegger" (77). Further, the sociality of all understanding led in Wittgenstein to examination of "language games" as central to a culture's most basic beliefs and practices. On the other hand, Heidegger, in search of "authentic" language as challenge to "publicness" and the "calculative," chose meditative and poetic utterance, but always with plurality at its center. As a consequence, "radial difference" becomes, in Heidegger, for example, "the 'unnamable' which is always different from whatever might try to state it. All is *articulated* through difference. Yet nothing can reduce that difference to the sayable" (78-79). Thus attentive silence, and respect for the mystical, tended to supercede interest in the issues of life--of historicity and the forms of society (79).

Skepticism toward action and commitment deepened, Tracy asserts, as the analysis of language-as-object or -as-system followed the work of Wittgenstein and Heidegger and challenged all language-as-use interpretation. Ferdinande de Saussure, through his linguistic studies and their applications in structuralism and semiotics, observed language synchronically as virtual system ("langue") rather than as actual conversation or discourse ("parole"). Since, the analysis of language-as-system is based on differential rather than substantive relations between

signifier, signified, and referent, immanent sense or presence is refuted as part of the nature of words and their connection to reality and is replaced by difference as the sole identifying characteristic of signs (82-83).

Extension of this theory to deep structures in other human enterprises leads also to uncovering any system's structural units and to equating them with the phonemes of alphabetical language for the development of a variety of "grammars" (or transformative linguistic effects)--in myths, in narratives, and in whole cultures (84). Structuralists observe then the combining of systemic binary oppositions to produce these transformative linguistic effects, at the same time calling in question concepts of experience (empiricism), symbol (romanticism), origin (historicism), or individual ego (humanism) (84).

With post-structuralism's deconstructive response, however, the grammar (or virtual "langue") of semiology is again invaded by the rhetorical (or persuasive use) of "parole." If "langue" represents the conditions for possible language use, it is also true that the tropes of rhetorical use operate to emphasize the difference, conflict, and rupture within the system. According to Derrida, the closed system by which all language is explained as differential sign implies the interaction of difference in chains of differentiation built on traces of absent signifiers through the whole differential system ad infinitum. Thus, "the system does not, for it cannot as a 'system' of differences, ever fully systematize [or close]" (85-87). In the process, both the naive and the surreptitious links between signifier, signified, and referent are broken, with the result that Derrida out-structualizes the structuralists and finds them deconstructed. Tracy describes it in another way:

> The ego is now de-centered. The dream of full presence is no more. Our language, synchronically, turns out to be a not-ever-realizable non-system of differences. Our language-use is an ever active, temporal deferring of "full" meaning as the differences multiply and as the traces of "absent" meanings disseminate. We must both differ and defer in order for "meaning" to happen at all. Words, in this Derridean vision, begin to disseminate into their signifiers and

> the signifiers disseminate all. All is difference. All difference is also always/already deferral of meaning. Difference has become differánce. (89)

Derrida's insights suggest, therefore, that even the examination of language itself as clue to the knowledge of reality becomes destabilized and plural because based on differential relations which constitute words: "the illusion that we language-sated beings are ever wholly present to ourselves or the illusion that any other reality is ever wholly present to us either" has thus been exposed (90).

For Derrida, then, "a radical, unstable rhetoric enters a once stable grammar and logic." It is a rhetoric of radically indeterminate tropes rather than one of topical arguments. . . with a Utopian tone of a strange kind of self-ironic ultimacy: the "abyss of indeterminacy" which *is* our situation, the "text" outside of which nothing exists" (90). Thus the combined hermeneutical analyses of Wittgenstein and Heidegger and the deconstruction of the nature of language-as-object by Derrida "have smashed the hope [of] any full-presenced unity of meaning" (91).

Following up on his review of such contemporary theories of explanation, Tracy insists upon a return to the analysis of language, not only as words, but as sentences and full texts as well--as neither system nor use alone, but as discourse. A return to emphasis on language-as-use reasserts that whenever "someone says [locutionary] something [illocutionary] about something [perlocutionary] to someone [interlocutionary]," sociality and history reenter consideration. Although the rhetoric of radicality points to an "abyss of indeterminacy" in the "text" outside of which nothing exists, and deconstruction appears to end with the anarchic free play of language, still language-as-system is, after all, only virtual, serving as explanation and correction, but not as closed interpretation (90-91).

Tracy claims that, following the realization that language, history, and individual consciousness are never fixed, pure, or fully present, language-bound interpreters return to the world of discourse--"chastened," aware that "we interpret in order to understand at all" (93), but return, nonetheless--to "relatively adequate knowledge, better interpretations, verified possibilities, intelligent, rational, responsible, relatively adequate discourse," that is, to "a chastened interpretation of texts" (94-95). Critics find hermeneutic discourse analysis recovered then, by thinkers like Ricoeur, who employ the explanatory study of metaphor on the level of

sentences and of plots for a theory of narrative text (97). Tracy observes that "the personal, and social-historical discourse of a decentered ego becomes a responsible, interpreting, hoping self in Ricoeur" and yields "new kinds of discourse-analysis, new retrieving, critical,and suspicious hermeneutics" (98). This development signals for Tracy a welcome return of ethical and political issues, with accompanying resistance to "what goes without saying," to a constant "return to the same," or "to a new monism," but in favor of the most relatively adequate "good" for "decision and action in our concrete social and historical situation" (100-01). This concern for decision and action recommends Ricoeur's theory for the analysis of Olsen's work. For to reenter history and society means, for Tracy and Ricoeur, using both structuralist explanation and hermeneutical truth in dialogue in order to find and be found by "new ways to be in the world."[52]

In the light of Tracy's analyses, the previously cited study by Richard E. Palmer referred to earlier, *Hermeneutics: Interpretation Theory in Schleiermacher, Dilthy, Heidigger and Gadamer,* can be seen as response to the challenge to restore judgment and commitment to the interpretive process (to reenter history through discourse that tests truth, as Ricoeur puts it) by incorporating phenomenology, while leaving room for the corrective contribution of semiotics (242-53). Palmer begins his final summary, "The Theses of Interpretation on the Hermeneutical Experience," with the triumvirate from Wittgenstein and Heidegger: history (fact and world), language (as constitutive), and being (knowing). In the phenomenological scheme that he goes on to describe, all interpretation is intrinsically historical (in categories of history and world), linguistic (bringing a world to stand), and ontological (disclosing the being of things). Through the dialectic of conversation, according to Palmer's survey, understanding encounters a negativity which broadens self-understanding, an event (historical) in which truth happens (ontological), emerging from concealment (linguistic) yet eluding reduction to concepts. Grounded in "the objective" that comes to expression in and through language, interpretation is, therefore, not analysis, but understanding, that is, being seized by the text (not a grasping through consciousness) that brings to full potentiality the interpreter and the text as partners in hermeneutical dialogue (244). The understanding thus offered speaks to present experience (of the text's meaning for today) in disclosure of truth. But the truth thus disclosed is not correspondence with "fact," but is dynamic, emergent--being brought into the light of

manifestness, both unconcealed and covered, "in its inexhaustible fulness" (245). Further, the experience is not aesthetic only, but more truly art; that is, a world in a definite form "is abidingly able to come to stand, to open up a space in being to enable the truth of being to become manifest" (245). Neither the work nor the interpreter is autonomous, but the work so manifested opens experience to "alter the interpreter from the side of the text" (247). Thus interpretation is not mastery or control, but a dialectic whereby the work and the interpreter experience a language event with the power to say, that is, to "bring a world to stand" (248).

Palmer describes this being seized by, participant in, the fixity of the text as not only sensuous delight in form but as a world brought to stand before one that negates one's limited horizon by the context it offers through query, through the breaking down of old ways of seeing and the opening up of new ones. The interpreter who hears "the world's" questions does not so much manipulate the work as a consequence, but rather, impressed by creative negativity, herself changes into a new understanding of the question in the text (its originating impulse) and thereby learns an unanticipated view of self and world and their relationship (249-50). In the language of the authentic historical awareness that formed the interpreter, the gap between the horizon of the work and one's own is bridged in dialectical encounters to inquire what is meaningful (252). Thus experiencing via self-understanding, not grasping a work's conceptual knowledge, encompasses this hermeneutic process which remains, at the same time, always tentative, ambiguous, and challenging to change (252).

In the writing of Tillie Olsen's most exhaustive and thorough critics, I find this kind of phenomenological enquiry, both from the side of the implied-author's consciousness and of the implied-reader's response.

Major Studies: The Critical Stance

Linda Marguerite Park-Fuller, in her dissertation, *Tillie Olsen: A Phenomenological Study of Consciousness with Implications for Performance*, identifies Olsen's fundamental themes as "the reclamation of lost lives and literature" (1). She quotes Olsen's own endorsement of "'another greatness in literature . . . so-called sociological literature,'" which she contrasts with the point of view of most of "those who write"--an educated leisure class (6). Olsen

attempts "'to reveal the essential humanity of a group, or class, or race by making its voice heard, and suggests the hazards of society's failure to attend to that voice'" (7). But her commitment to celebrate every day achievements is further enriched, according to Park-Fuller's analysis, by her style, existential expressions that through lyricism explore the modes of human consciousness (11). Applying Suzanne Bennett's categories of the lyrical novel, she notes that Olsen's literary structure emphasizes imagistic, vertical plots; qualities of perception in her characters; biased and engaged points of view; and imaginative, dislocated settings--all utilized to explore human consciousness in the twentieth-century tradition of experimental literature, established earlier in the romance novel (8-9).

In addition, the sound qualities of Olsen's prose that create "implicit acoustic space" arise for Park-Fuller from the use of speech rhythms and dialects, incantatory narrative, and recurring songs, poetry, and folk sayings and rhymes. The recognition in her work of significant aural dimensions that call for performance has been promoted by Olsen herself through her public readings. At a conference short course, entitled, "Toward a Form of One's Own," she identified oral interpretation as "'a most essential way of teaching and keeping literature alive'" (10).

Park-Fuller's phenomenological study examines writing as source for and mirror of human actualization, offering as thesis that Tillie Olsen "writes to achieve and maintain balance" between self and world, self and other, and among opposing elements within the self--that is, in order to become a self as she expresses a world (190). Citing such critics as J. Hillis Miller, Simone de Beauvoir, and phenomenological philosophers (from the Geneva School to the reader-response critics), she analyzes Olsen's works, not only as calls to social change and to passion for self-expression, but also as "explorations into the existential modes of human consciousness" (14).

After thus relating the impetus to reform with the act of coming to expression in order to be heard, Park-Fuller defines consciousness as "act," not "faculty," a process developing from the subject's intentionality to understand the world of objects, feelings, thoughts, perceptions, and imagination that she encounters and then constitutes in the act of identifying, naming, and interacting with them. Thus human existence is related to "being in the world"--again, function or process rather than "object"--"a creative intentionality, a turning to things-that-are in order to

express and articulate them" (21-22). By examining this on-going dialogue between act and expression as reflected in Tillie Olsen's prose, Park-Fuller's study posits "the inseparability of our expressions and our emerging selves . . . [which] leads to the possibility of examining an author's incarnate consciousness implicit in her literary work" (28). Thus, in the tradition of Heidegger, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, and Bachelard, she identifies the three categories of phenomenological study--knowing, the world, and the self--and their focus in literary theory and criticism: hermeneutics, theorizing models for the process of understanding texts; poetic theory, concerning the nature and expression of poetry; and practical criticism, examining and evaluating the intersubjectivity of author, text, reader, and world in specific literary works. From among the categories of practical criticism, Park-Fuller adopts author-centered studies as her method, tracing recurrent phenomenological themes throughout the work of Olsen's "implied authors."

By examining style and themes, rejecting stereotypes and preconceptions, and keying on the consciousness-creating processes observable in literature as act, Park-Fuller focuses her phenomenological, author-centered analysis on the expressions of consciousness embodied in Olsen's fiction. In doing so she identifies a developmental model that operates within the characters and also reflects the on-going engagement of the implied author's self-creative potential.

She further argues that phenomenology's broad interests--in revealing experiential patterns of consciousness, in reducing human bias in order to confront "things as they are," and in considering all dimensions of existential encounters (for example, the aural qualities of fiction)--commend it as an appropriate approach to Olsen studies. It is her conclusion that

> the chronological development of Olsen's consciousness as she attempts to understand and to rectify existential imbalance (between self and world, self and other, self and self) forms the essential structure of her fictive world and thus provides experiential basis for identifying her recurring themes. (385)

It is through Olsen's characters and their struggle to balance inner and outer reality that Park-Fuller analyzes Olsen's own consciousness, developed through successive constructions of implied authors.

Finally, Park-Fuller defends author-consciousness criticism against indictment as intentional fallacy by pointing to her focus upon phenomenological evidence in the text, for it is upon such techniques as characterization and style that her chronicle of author-consciousness is based, resulting in a developmental account of the implied author's engagement with the world and the text. Her subsequent criticism is an account of the struggle for balance--first, between self and world, with emphasis on the future, in Olsen's early writings; between self and other in *Tell Me a Riddle;* and, finally, within the self in "Requa I," with emphasis on reclaiming the past in the latter two works.

Another interactional model identified by Park-Fuller within the author-text-world-reader dynamic of phenomenological hermeneutics is reader-response criticism. She describes it as the reader's encounter with the "virtual" in a text--that is, with what is said: the familiar, the incomplete, and the contradictory--guided, by the author's strategies, toward possible organization and understanding (63-64). Thus blanks, gaps, and negations within the text invite reader participation in creating both textual and extra-textual meaning, but always through terms set by the text (64-65). This second form of phenomenological criticism is utilized in a recent book on Olsen's work, Elaine Neil Orr's *Tillie Olsen and a Feminist Spiritual Vision.*

Orr makes a convincing argument for a religious reading of Olsen as spiritual humanist. In her introduction, she summarizes her premise in two parts: that "creative literature discloses ways of knowing and being in the world, which have implications for who we are and what our purpose is in existing" and "that the appropriation of a text's vision or world may be a religious act." She makes the disclaimer that these statements do not imply that such texts are either "intrinsically or primarily religious," but that "coherent and serious works of literature invite conversation about being human and the possibilities for transcendance." She cites Tillie Olsen's works as inviting such religious engagement in the awareness they offer "of healing and perhaps transcending presence in human experience," and of a compelling "moral contemplation in their presentation of a way or mode of being in the world" (xv).

Orr reads Olsen's "riddle" as the mystery of "depletion and renewing in life." Using a chronological approach in a developmental model similar to Park-Fuller's, she analyzes Olsen's work, from her early poems and articles and the novel through the short stories and *Silences,* as

"a search among absences, silences, discontinuities, and brokenness" for a life-affirming vision based on hope. Orr's interest centers on the figures of breathing, journeying, blossoming, and piecing; and her broadest inquiry points toward "the potential for awakening to new comprehensions of life through women's literature" (xv). Her references range wide among women writers, critics, and theologians, and she writes in the tradition of Matthew Arnold, believing that literature is one locus for the religious "turn" from other-world to this-world revelation. Orr writes with phenomenological faithfulness to both experience and its expression in Olsen's sociological and poetic fiction, emphasizing a reader-response criticism that is guided and shaped by Olsen's art, but is, at the same time, co-creative in its interpretation of her negations and openings. She finds Tillie Olsen convincing, as both realist and visionary, and powerful, therefore, in her transformative impact. In addition, the affective/didactic fallacy is neutralized in her criticism,in part because she openly identifies her implied-reader as religious and also because she authenticates Olsen's awareness of the deepest quandaries in contemporary life: threat of annihilation by the bomb; unmet needs, especially of the child; economic and political discrimination against difference in sex, race, and class.

In her initial discussion of phenomenological perspectives on literature-as-act, Park-Fuller identifies a third critical stance. In addition to the author-world-text approach in which the author's experience of creating the text is shown to work reflexively to create also an implicit self-author (Park-Fuller), and the world-text-reader emphasis in which the reader acts to create the work out of the virtual text, guided by the author's limits, negations and openings (Orr), a third dynamic occurs when reader becomes performer in the context of an immediate audience, "in communal experience [that] provides a re-grounding--a base for the reader/audience to act on the world" (67). Though all three of these approaches to so-called practical criticism are present in phenomenological readings, one or another tends to dominate any particular critical analysis. I believe the reading of *Tell Me a Riddle* developed in this study contributes, in particular, to the third phenomenological stance, that is, to the perception and experience of Olsen's thought and style as spoken/heard.

The re-grounding for action suggested in this third critical emphasis comes about, according to Park-Fuller through the interaction of author-world-reader in all their combinations,

including both the development of author-consciousness and the critique of reader-response; however, more interactions enter the experience as well, for example, an initial pre-conscious pre-enactment of the sense of a text through its characteristic repetitions, rhythms, refrains, and reversals, and the founding of a community responsive to the implications of the metaphorical twist in the text as its consequence (66-67). Quoting an article by Mikel Dufrenne, Park-Fuller traces the results of such pre-enactments to the effect of incantation and of physical sensations of sound from the spoken language which offers the readers/hearers of literature "'something to feel before we know'" (16).

As extension of her comment upon this third approach to practical criticism, I believe that the silent, solitary reader is also affected by the aural qualities of Olsen's prose. And the sense of "presence" thus evoked, though eventually identified with the implied author's consciousness as well as an implied-narrator's voice, offers also, and before the broader associations, a subliminal appeal to the reader, that is, the winsome attraction operative in literary prose, and especially in poetic fiction. Thus the importance of recognizing arrangements of rhetorical strategies arises as means to identifying the pervasive influence of their auditory effects, as well as their implications for artistic form and content.

In addition to evoking active reader-engagment in the perlocutionary effects of a work (their impetus to action-reaction), poetic prose can be community-founding, heard as if in company because clearly addressed beyond an originary dialogue. "Meant to be heard" and "to be facilitated in responsive action" to its universalized connotation--these are the impressions and effects of Tillie Olsen's prose; and the rhetorical strategies highlighted in this study are a major source of that impetus. Thus concentration on intratextual dynamics, or the world of the text, leads also to its intertextuality, or interaction within the world. In conclusion, then, the two full-length studies of Olsen, in combination with the present work, form across-the-spectrum examples of phenomenological analyses, applied to both a work's initial and immediate and its far-reaching effects.

Life and Writings of the 50's

Linda Park-Fuller's bibliography organizes the critical response to Olsen under author-centered essays and articles,views from broader contexts, and analyses of specific works. She includes, in addition, anthologies, acknowledgements, dedications, references, and research publications' entries; the phenomenologist, performance, and feminist studies that ground her criticism, and more general sources. The reader informed by her analysis is thus provided an exhaustive reference for Olsen studies. Elaine Neil Orr, by contrast, offers a selected bibliography, leaving the reader to cull her informative notes for other sources, especially from among feminist writers and theologians. More appropriate to the present study are sources and criticism on the background and text of *Tell Me a Riddle*. Beyond this initial focus, critical analyses of Olsen's other works will serve to reveal, also, her context preceding the 1950's publications and the direction her writing has taken since the mid-century.

Before their comment on the overall response to *Tell Me a Riddle* Selma Burkom and Margaret Williams' brief but informative 1976 study of Olsen's life and work, "De-Riddling Tillie Olsen's Writing," notes that much of their factual information "has been generously shared by Tillie Olsen" (83). Identifying the themes of her 50's publications as endurance, caring, and questioning, they trace the emergence of *Tell Me a Riddle*, after nearly twenty years of literary silence, from her 1954 enrollment in a creative writing course under Arthur Foff at San Francisco State University. At forty-one years of age, as her youngest child began her formal schooling, Tillie Olsen entered higher education for the first time. With an incomplete draft of "Help Her to Believe" (published in 1956 and later retitled "I Stand Here Ironing"), Olsen qualified for an eight-month Stanford University Creative Writing Fellowship and, thus freed from the necessity of employment, wrote and published in 1956 "Baptism" ("O Yes") and "Hey Sailor, What Ship?" After a two-year return to wage-earning, she received a 1959 Ford Foundation Grant which allowed her to complete and publish the fourth story, "Tell Me a Riddle," and then to collect under that title all of her 1950's work. *Tell Me a Riddle* first appeared in 1961 as a Delta paperback, and then under a Lippincott label in 1962. (See Works Cited for publication histories of individual selections preceding the collection.)

Burkom and Williams, like other critics who comment biographically, recognize this period of Olsen's creativity as a shift away from the Communist organizer's direct indictment of economically oppressive institutions to a description of the effects of such injustice upon the family, a strategy introduced in her novel of the 30's (published in 1974). In the interval, Olsen's experience of raising four daughters, and its confirmation of her childhood sensitivity to domestic and political struggle, became the bases for *Tell Me a Riddle*. Erika Duncan, in an article, "Coming of Age in the Thirties: A Portrait of Tillie Olsen," quotes her assaying, "'It is no accident that the first work I considered publishable began: "I stand here ironing. . ."' (122). The earliest autobiographical roots of Olsen's settings and themes is examined in a subsequent discussion of her 1930's works, but another quotation from Duncan's article confirms the tie between Olsen's experiences of that era and her 1950's publications.

> . . . a lifetime of caring for other people, will and passion bursts out of every word that is expressed as well as out of the spaces between the words. . . . [S]uddenly the dry earth cracks and the spring gushes forth, . . . Once again the passion of the making of the thirties comes up full blown out of the fifties' brutal shell. (221)

These critics write from the perspective of the late '70's and early '80's when reprints of *Tell Me a Riddle* were appearing; the more immediate responses to her fiction address similar issues.

The 1962 *Book Review Digest* includes criticism of this "burst," "gush," and "passion . . . full blown." From the *Christian Science Monitor* S. B. Bellows finds both "O Yes" and "Ironing" to have undergone "only partial transition from the realm of personal experience to art" and the riddle of human suffering to lie "heavy and unillumined in her pages" (7), while R. M. Elman in *Commonweal* identifies Olsen's fault as "enthusiasm . . . her humanity unrestrained." However, the former acknowledges two of her stories as already anthologized, and Elman concludes that "there are stories in this collection which are perfectly realized works of art." In the same issue of the BRD, a reviewer for *Kirkus* finds the works "sometimes shapeless," lacking "definition"; and Irene Gitomer, in *Library Journal*, states they "demonstrate great promise," but that the first promotes "answers too psychologically pat." Irving Howe, in the *New Republic*, evaluates Olsen's experience as "narrow": "having been possessed by the

powers of memory, [she] may now move ahead to fiction in which everything depends on the powers of invention." However, he singles out the title story as "remarkable . . . a 'tour de force,'" asserting that "Mrs. Olsen treats this familiar subject with balance." In a later review, Mary Rohrberger, writing for *Critical Survey of Short Fiction*, 1981, cites "Tell Me a Riddle," as the "most haunting of the collection" but observes, "if the story has a fault, it may be that it is too painful as it grasps the reader and pulls him or her too close to raw feeling" (20-22).

References to the problem of incomplete distancing, the failure to develop a sufficiently objective correlative--more familiar in criticisms of her novel--are noteworthy among earlier reviewers for their singularity. For example, Mary Rohrberger concludes her review: "for a collection of short stories so powerful, there has been remarkably little critical analysis of Olsen's fiction, although reviews at the time of their publication were entirely laudatory." Though requiring qualification, Rohrberger's assessment does reflect the tone of most of the initial response. In another example, Robert Coles begins his 1975 *New Republic* review with the assertion, "Everything she has written has become almost immediately a classic," and identifies Olsen's themes with George Eliot's, expressed in the prelude to *Middlemarch*: "'bluddering lives . . . a tragic failure which found no sacred poet and sank unwept into oblivion'" (29). Coles sees Olsen as one "spared celebrity," but "a singular talent that will not let go of one: a talent that prompts tears, offers the artist's compassion and forgiveness, but makes plain how fierce the various struggles must continue to be" (30). For Coles and other students of Olsen's work, her intensity is congruent with the weight of her argument.

Another early reviewer, William Van O'Connor, writing for the 1963 issue of *Studies in Short Fiction*, finds "'Riddle' . . . serene, with the distance and calm of tragedy. . . [showing] the human being's capacity to endure his own suffering, his own irrationality, his own despair . . . . [S]ubjected to enormous indignities, they remain dignified" (23). O'Connor locates Olsen's tragic form in the early romance tradition of American letters, with its non-specific settings; vertical, episodic plots; and character development appealing to the Everyman consciousness in her readers. He cites parallels among twentieth-century writers as well, such as Thornton Wilder, Dylan Thomas, and William Faulkner with their powers to evoke universal questions and longings, intricately intertwined with particular eras and moods. In her 1981

contribution to *American Women Writers: A Critical Reference Guide*, Helen J. Schwartz defines further the tragic dimension in Olsen's fiction: "She portrays the victories of the human spirit--not grand in the absolute height achieved, but inspiring because of the awesomeness of the forces to be battled" (305). With her focus on its systemic dimensions, Schwartz' assessment offers a possible shift of emphasis in the definition of tragedy.

Writing from a different perspective, Sally Cunneen, in "Tillie Olsen: Storyteller of Working America," a 1980 study for *Christian Century*, describes her experience with Olsen texts as teacher at a state university: "the emotional power of her prose is unforgettable. . ." (570). She ascribes this emotive quality to a combination of social realism and "the poetic expression of individual consciousness . . ." in a style that blends "realistic, often comic dialogue and profoundly evocative interior monologue, spiced with remembered bits of song" (570). She further relates the dislocation of the Russian emigré portrayed in Eva with "America's own loss of contact with idealistic, hardworking, communal roots," and traces Olsen's impact to "the miracle of sensitivity and love that survives even [the most] crushing circumstances," and to [t]he parents she has created . . . mythic, caring figures larger than life, tragic rather than pathetic" (571). Whether accurate in her definition, Cunneen is convincing when she finds Olsen unique as an artist who not only comes from working-class roots, but has remained emotionally and imaginatively identified with them. "Fortunately," she dares observe, "Olsen was never rescued" (571). As voice for the victims of political and economical repression, Olsen chooses to focus on the disproportion of potential to realization in the human experience; the implied personal and social costs issue in the tragic vision to which many of her critics attest.

The sources of her qualities of perception lie in Olsen's early life and in the particular view of motherhood which she developed, always both affirming and critical, with its emphasis on sacrificial survival that nearly obliterates personal creativity, if not life itself. Cunneen uses a quotation from *Silences* to illustrate Olsen's awareness, again of the tragic dimension, especially ironic as associated with motherhood:

> Balzac . . . described creation in terms of . . . intelligent passionate motherhood. . . . The calling upon total capacities; the re-living and the new using of the past; the comprehensions; the fascination, absorption, intensity. All almost

> certain death to creation. . . . because the circumstances for sustained creation are almost impossible. The need cannot be first. It can have at best, only part self, part time. More than in any human relationship, overwhelmingly more, motherhood means being instantly interruptible. . . . It is distraction, not meditation, that becomes habitual; . . . Unused capacities atrophy, cease to be. (572)

Here Olsen herself becomes metaphor for the "fortunate fault" or "fall" in this description. From the choice for motherhood, an unconscious but irrevocable consequence follows, in her experience and her subsequent assessments: maternal creativity thwarts the artist's drive and need, and only a sacrificial courage can salvage the consciousness required to register the loss on one's awareness, and then to express it to a community that needs to restore society's loss at the hands of such unawareness.

The theme of motherhood as metaphor absorbs other Olsen critics, especially Erika Duncan who identifies the familiar jokes about Jewish mothers as a vestige of guilt among those who sucked dry their source of nurture. She reads Olsen's old woman, in a 1980 article titled "The Hungry Jewish Mother," as part of the tradition of women asked to give nurturance which they themselves never receive, feeding men and children without personal resources for renewal. From the perspective of "the hungry mother," the feeding images in *Tell Me a Riddle* are central for Duncan; and references to giving and taking among the children and with the old man, crucial feminist symbols.

By contrast, Joanne Frye, writing for the 1981 *Studies in Short Fiction,* also traces the development of motherhood as experience and metaphor in "I Stand Here Ironing," but believes that Olsen achieves a positive balance between circumstance and selfhood that comments positively on the search for identity in modern society. However, Jacqueline Mintz, in *The Centennial Review*, 1978, is less sanguine. She insists that Olsen's assessment of woman as "complement to the male religious scholar and administrator of justice," clearly rejects all vestiges of Old World Jewish tradition. For Mintz, as for Duncan, Olsen's theme that mothers suffer irretrievable loss of creative needs and gifts is uppermost in her fiction. She hears the children's treatment of Eva as condescending, demanding, unheeding, and Jeannie's generous

interpretations of her grandfather as misreading his merely selfish demand to be reassured. For she, like Erika Duncan, sees Jeannie, by contrast, as "the voice of Tillie Olsen singing hope." To Duncan, Jeannie is, in fact, in love "with the songs of all the generations of women, long buried, maimed and trapped" and may "through the ardor of her listening . . . have the strength to set it free." "The Hungry Jewish Mother," ends with a prediction: "Thus we shall all go back to where the music in us is and find the music in our mothers that will help us live" (240). Assuming Olsen's definition of feminist concerns through the perspective of her inclusive humanism, I believe Duncan reads her correctly.

In addition to these earliest responses and topical approaches to *Tell Me a Riddle,* full-length studies by Linda Park-Fuller and Elaine Neil Orr evaluate Olsen's 1950's publications as attempts to be constructive beyond tragedy and survival. Again, identifying as the theme of her earliest writings elemental endurance among victims of economic and social institutions, Park-Fuller finds Olsen's focus narrowed by the 50's to depiction of the effect of oppressive cultural systems upon family life and friendship. At the same time, a shift occurs from events projected into the future to experience remembered from the past--from a lesson taught to a retrospective view only attempted. Thus more tentative and enquiring in tone than her first articles, poems, and early fiction, *Tell Me a Riddle* sustains Olsen's confrontation of self with world, but characterizes the self as primarily enquiring--in relation to immediate others in the first three stories, and to itself in "Tell Me a Riddle."

According to Park-Fuller's reading, the earlier stories depict the self vacillating between over-identification with (becoming lost in) the other and alienation from (becoming lost without) community. Tracing the development of the authorial consciousness through her major characters--Emily's mother, Whitey, and Carol--she emphasizes the struggle to achieve and maintain a balance between self and other: Can a mother and her child identify sufficiently to be able then to separate as whole individuals? Can an alienated derelict survive without a significant bond with a community? How can the committed individual cope with responsibility for creative connections within an alienating culture? Park-Fuller goes on to analyze the title story as even more narrowly focused, upon a balance sought within the self, that is, between immanence (absorption with immediate demands) and transcendence (development of individual, creative

potential). She reads the old woman's story as the struggle to reclaim the past, not only through survival beyond its imprint upon her own life, but in transformation of that heritage and experience through her own creative expression. For Park-Fuller, the interaction of the implied author with her developing work both parallels and grows in dialogue with the interaction of her characters within the work. For her, the possibility of such reclamation is only suggested in *Tell Me a Riddle*, however, and awaits Olsen's last work of fiction to be realized fully.

For Elaine Neil Orr, also, Eva's metamorphosis from the oppression of being literally eaten--"herself the pocked pear or the silenced voice" (109)--to an expressive and valued self occurs through being reunited with her first power, that is, through hearing and learning from her past, communal dream and expressing that vision once more in poetry and song (103-17). In "O Yes," she sees responsibility for overcoming segregation achieved among family and friends in the singing/chanting community that affirms renewal and change--"O yes"--and that is called to "carry the world" (92-103). Whitey, in "Hey Sailor," though disinherited from his past hope for brotherhood and dulled by addiction, experiences communion again through touch, through water and fire images, and in poetic expression (85-92), while Emily's mother, faced with the challenge to reframe memory and the uses of time, is finally confronted by a hope that also approaches out of the brokenness and failure of her past.

Thus, Park-Fuller's author-consciousness criticism highlights relationships between world, other, and self, focusing on psychological spaces in which impression becomes transformed into personal identity and hope for justice. Elaine Orr's response, by contrast, emphasizes the uses of time in the life of the other, the family, and the society and its potential to reclaim individual identity and promise. For her, the theme of renewed responsibility through human connectedness makes Tillie Olsen's a spiritual, that is, "religious" vision. Along with less exhaustive critics, Park-Fuller and Orr develop assumptions about authorial presence, whether directly biographical or implied, and about readers' interests and values as they respond with creative interpretation to the openings and negations in the fiction.

Life and Writings of the 30's

Olsen's earliest work offers direct reflection upon her experiences growing up in a working-class family during the 1920's and 30's in the plains states and, later, on the West Coast. Burkom and Williams identify Olsen's birth as 1913, though many critics note the uncertainty of the date as either 1912 or 1913. (Tillie Olsen's own testimony is, simply, that her family did not keep exact records.) She was the second of seven children born to Samuel and Ida Lerner who, as secularized Jews and revolutionaries, fled Russia in the wake of the 1905 rebellion and immigrated to the United States,[53] where they first attempted farming in Wyoming and Nebraska, but eventually settled in Omaha. Samuel Lerner worked as packinghouse laborer, painter, and paperhanger, but also found time to become State Secretary of the Nebraska Socialist Party. The list of jobs held by their second child in her effort to supplement the family's meager income included peanut-sorter (at the age of ten), power-press operator, trimmer in a slaughter house, cook/waitress, and assembly-line worker in food processing and warehousing--all experiences later reflected in her fiction.

Tillie Lerner grew up, Erika Duncan writes, listening to speeches by the great socialist orators of the early century. Olsen herself recalls hearing Eugene Victor Debs,[54] as guest in her parental home in the early 1920's, make one of his favorite analogies, likening the collective human enterprise to a great symphony in which each player contributes unique gifts to its eventual harmony. Olsen's use of musical imagery and emphasis upon personal commitment may date from such influences. Accustomed to being included in political events, she was among those chosen, with two other little girls, to present Debs with red roses at one town hall appearance; and she recalls as well her brothers and sisters having to sleep on chairs overnight to make room for house guests, come to attend these rallies. Duncan further notes the presence in the Lerner home of old copies of *The Comrade*,[55] with its reprints of democratic and revolutionary art and of world classics, along with writings of the native American populist and socialist movements. Excerpts from Upton Sinclair's collection, *Cry for Justice*,[56] also appeared in its pages, introducing the Lerner children to European history, literature, and art ("Coming of Age" 209).

Duncan further observes that besides classical oratory and phraseology, other speech rhythms sounded around the young Tillie Lerner, "revealing to her early how language was able to affect and move people, the language of the immigrants who did not yet know all the words they needed in order to express themselves, who had to somehow make do with the words they did know, stretching them . . ."(210)--a description echoing Ricoeur's analysis of the work of metaphors. As a young girl, she also found beauty in the language of the prairie ("the sodders"), of the packinghouse strikers, and of the black church around the corner in their neighborhood. She attests to loving the rhythms of African-American speech which she "could not fully enter, yet longed for" (210), and to attending their services until her mother punished her "for going to church" (Orr 117). According to Duncan, she aware early of something else for which language was the signal, that is, of that "lessening" of those around her--schoolmates, family, neighbors--and of "that harming and impairing capacity happening in herself" (210).

From books, on the other hand, Tillie Lerner began to cultivate an ear for literary expression: with Kansas-published Haldeman Julius 5-cent Blue Books, small enough to button into a work-shirt pocket; from *Poetry Magazine* [57] to which her family also subscribed; and, finally, in a marathon of reading at the Omaha public library where she began with "A" and worked through "M" on the fiction shelves. The librarian, Willa Cather's niece, reluctantly granted Tillie Lerner adult privileges early; and, although the young reader was often late in returning books, and left apple seeds from her lunch among their pages, those privileges held (Dunkan "Coming of Age" 211).

She also memorized long passages from Whitman and eventually read the social critics Ibsen and Hugo, black writers W. E. B. Dubois and Langston Hughes, and feminist-realists Elizabeth Maddox Roberts, Ellen Glasgow, and Olive Schreiner. Leftist critics John Dos Passos and Mike Gold appeared in *New Masses*,[58] another magazine familiar in the Lerner household (Rosenfelt 376). In her personal journal, about which Deborah Rosenfelt has reported in a 1981 *Feminist Studies* article, Olsen reflected her absorption in social issues of the day and the creative stress she felt as a result:

> Have been reading Nietzche and *Modern Quarterly*.[59] I must write out, clearly & concisely, my ideas on things. I vacillate so easily. And I am so-so sloppy in my

mental thinking. What are my *true* opinions, for instance, on socialism, what life should be, the future of literature, true art, the relations between the sexes, where are we going.

. . .

Yes, I must write it out. . . .

Later: That's quite simple to say, but there are so few things one can be sure & definite about--so often I am pulled both ways. (377-78)[60]

This early absorption with social, artistic, and personal issues signals the beginning of the struggle to relate them that will characterize her later writing.

Another and fundamental contribution to her social awareness was the fact that her parents had abandoned their religious tradition for Hakalah, the Jewish Enlightenment movement, which emphasized options other than, in particular,the orthodox endurance of persecution until the Messiah should appear. For example, within the Bund, an organization among Russian Jews influenced by socialism, faith was interpreted to include social action as its members worked to eradicate forms of oppression which were the breeding grounds for hatred. Belief grew that "a people must be its own messiah," and religious superstition and restriction came to be viewed as part of the enemy (Orr 24-25). The Yiddishkeit also influenced Olsen's parents with visions of another form of liberation; and Isaac Loeb Peretz (the Yiddish writer whom Olsen prefers to Isaac Bashevis Singer--see note 4), became their literary interpreter. Finally, at age fifteen, while hunting through an Omaha junkshop, Tillie Lerner bought for 10 cents an old and damaged volume of bound copies of the *Atlantic Monthly* and read in it "Life in the Iron Mills" by an anonymous author. This 1861 publication, depicting the oppression of miners within the developing industrial economy of mid-nineteenth-century America, showed her, as she attested later, that "'literature can be made out of the lives of despised people'" (Burkom 571). Only in her adult life, in a collection of Emily Dickinson's letters that she read, one lunch hour, in the San Francisco Public Library, did she learn that the author was a woman, Rebecca Harding Davis.[61] She claims, however, not to have been surprised that the writer of the manuscript was a woman, once notable for a series of popular novels; for by this time, Olsen had a growing awareness that both those whom Davis wrote about and the authors who gave

them voice were often lost to literature: "Nowhere am I in it: Unlimned they disappear." The refrain from these lines of Whitman's nineteenth-century lament for native Americans, "Yonnondio," became the title for her own earliest attempt at fiction, itself later almost lost (Cunneen 571).

In response to her deepening social concern, and to her early political conditioning, Tillie Lerner joined the Young Communist League in 1931, and, though still in high school, briefly attended a training center sponsored by the Party in Kansas City. She was instructed in political organizing, and was later arrested leafletting packinghouse workers. While in jail she contracted pleurisy, with the complications of incipient tuberculosis, and, following her release, had to return home for a period of convalescence. Thus forced to withdraw from high school in her senior year, she never returned (Burkom 66). In late February, 1932, at age nineteen and still recuperating from illness, Tillie Lerner began a novel; and the following year she gave birth to her first child, a daughter, Karla. The result of these changes in her life, Erika Duncan notes, was an increasing awareness of the interaction between social and personal realities. Olsen describes her writing of that period "'as having come out of the colleges of motherhood, of everyday work life, and of human struggle bursting the thick wall of self, as it went on'" ("Coming of Age" 211). Duncan observes that the young writer-mother then chose "to focus on the family because she felt that it was only there that one could really see how social forces and social circumstances limit and shape what one can do," and because she realized how rarely literature captured that reality (211).

As the Depression of the 30's deepened, Tillie Lerner's response differed from that of many of her literary contemporaries in that she rejected the existentialist expressions of *angst*, the alternative of lonely detachment before unalterable conditions. In the tradition of Tolstoy and Gorky, she continued, with other young radicals, to believe in change through committed political and personal action. Her style and tone reflected, in particular, the WPA-funded artists, writers, and film makers who were currently producing art and literature "of the people," both in fiction and the documentary (Duncan 208-09). Also, along with the Depression came, for her, a new sense of connectedness with liberation struggles around the world and with poets and writers in the Philippines (Jose Rizal), Latin America (Pablo Neruda), and Asia (Lu Hsun, the

"Chinese Chekhov," and Ting Ling), and Duncan reports her wearing cotton instead of silk stockings to protest Japan's 1932 invasion of China (211-12). Her beliefs, that all phases of life are interrelated--communal and private, international and local--and that past and future are both rooted in the present, were already firmly established. The strength to cultivate her multiple concerns--domestic commitments, political activism and literary consciousness--would call for the unusual persistence and broadening capacities that early typified Tillie Lerner's life.

After a brief sojourn in Minnesota, she moved to California with her infant daughter, migrating between Stockton in the valley and San Franciscso and Venice--in part to evade rent payments, according to her account to Erika Duncan (212). It may be that in her "wandering up and down California," her experiences with Mexican-American workers in the valley inspired her poetic indictment, "I Want You Women Up North to Know." Her first published work, it appeared in *The Partisan,*[62] March, 1934. Burkom and Williams indicate that the periodicals carrying her early works were sponsored by John Reed Clubs[63] or by other Communist Party affiliates. They also speculate that her early poems derive their free verse form and repetitive refrains from Whitman. However, Duncan points out that Tillie Lerner identified the immediate inspiration for the poem in a parenthetical note that accompanied the title: "(Based on a Letter by Felipe Ibarro in *New Masses,* Jan. 9, 1934.)"

Especially appropriate to these initial works, Park-Fuller's approach analyzes the implied author's attempts to achieve balance between self as critic and exploitative world by giving voice to those she believed victims of capitalist oppression. Olsen's intention is, clearly, to reach, if not those who stand to profit from such a system, then those whose support perpetuates its excesses. The poem begins:

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

"exquisite work, madame, exquisite pleats"

vanish into a bloated face, ordering more dresses,

gouging the wages down,

dissolve into maria, ambrosa, catalina,

stitching these dresses from dawn to night,

in blood, in wasting flesh.

The four vignettes that follow these cinematic dissolves incarnate oppression: in "Catalina Rodriguez, 24 / body shrivelled to a child's of twelve / catalina rodriguez, last stages of consumption, / works for three dollars a week from dawn to midnight"; in "Maria Vasquez, spinster, / for fifteen cents a dozen stitches garments for children she has never had"; in "Catalina Torres, mother of four / to keep the starved body starving, embroiders from dawn to night"; and "in Ambrosa Espinoza trusts in god," whose brother, 25, lies helpless after a railroad accident amputated his leg.

For Catalina Rodriguez, aesthetic metaphors of nature and art mock her pain as "the bright red blood embroiders the floor of her room":

White rain stitching the night, . . .

white gulls of hands, darting, veering,

white lightning, threading the clouds,

this is the exquisite dance of her hands . . .

and her cough, gay, quick, staccato, . . .

is appropriate accompaniment for the esthetic

dance of her fingers,

and the tremolo, tremolo when the hands tremble

with pain.

And for Catalina Torres, ironically, envy is inappropriate toward the "fat little prairie-roll bodies that will bulge in the silks she needles" since "the rags that stretch on her own brood, / and jut with the bony ridge that marks hunger's landscape" are

more intricate than any a thousand hands could

fashion.

there where the cloth is ravelled or darned,

by Poverty herself.

Olsen's Marxist analysis attacks luxury financed through the blood and flesh of impoverished Mexican women and children.

In another indictment, Ambrosa's pennies "keep god incarnate . . . keep the priest in wine." Without children of her own, "Ambrosa clothes god and the priest with handmade children's dresses." The dark satire of Lerner's figures, drawn from art, music, dance, and religious rite, make their appeal to mothers who buy the smocked and decorated work of poverty's hands. The aroused conscience of such unwitting consumers, exposed to the truth of economic exploitation, are to demand political reform. Olsen's feminism is universal from its beginnings, accusatory, but then inviting change:

Women up north, I want you to know,

I tell you this can't last forever.

I swear it won't."

Symbols familiar to her later fiction are in place here: hands, the child, forms of art, refrains come full-circle.

A second poem appeared the next month in the *Partisan*. "There Is a Lesson," more insistently imperative, is also prophetic, addressed to Austria's Nazi puppet who, as reported in the Feb. 15 *San Francisco Chronicle*, has closed its schools "to keep children off the hazardous streets." In reaction to Social Democracy's subversion of a nation, Olsen adapts academic metaphors to the ominous instruction of those streets: the alphabet "written in blood," a lesson lying in "collapsed books of bodies," and children who "might be riddled by the bullets of knowledge, / The deadly gas of revolution. . . ." The artistry of the free verse arises from parallels drawn between mayhem in the streets and tools of learning, as rhetoric is employed here again to raise political consciousness: "a volume written with three thousand bodies. . . . a sentence spelled by the grim faces of bereaved women. . . ." This protest against Fascism ends, "Long Live our Soviets." Though Tillie Lerner's politics is ideological, and her artistry more didactic than lyric, her voice, in convincing irony, contrasts traditional lessons, cancelled in order to forestall danger, with the instruction of the streets which will prove far more deadly to the

children of Austria. Through the device of direct address, puppet Dollfuss' "fat heart" is, like "the fat bellies" of American capitalism in Olsen's other writings of the period, indicted for the crimes of economic and political tyranny.

Burkom and Williams describe the techniques of this poetry as the "transformation of abstractions into concrete forms in the service of a simple polemic" (71). And though they misread "There Is a Lesson" as addressed to a Marxist rather than a Fascist regime (assessing Lerner's "use of apparent opposites" as insight that "virtuous ends entail dire means"), they are correct that her imaginative translation of abstract ideas into their concrete effects is forerunner of her later fiction, as is also her use of images from the arts.

The *Partisan* poems were succeeded by two prose accounts--in the August, 1934 issue of the *New Republic*[64] and the Sept./Oct. *Partisan Review*[65]--of incidents that occurred during union organizing among San Francisco's longshoremen. Duncan describes how Tillie Lerner became involved in this movement, "putting out the *Waterfront Worker* and . . . on board ship a great deal, holding odd jobs around the clock" ("Coming of Age" 212). She had met Jack Olsen, a union printer, in 1933, and with him and others worked for national recognition of a local of the International Longshoremen's Association which was attempting to organize the waterfront. Burkom and Williams document how local city management of the '20's formed an Industrial Association to lock out national unions but was finally challenged through the Maritime Strike of May, 1934. When picket lines along the Embarcadero were challenged by scabs, a battle erupted on "Bloody Thursday," July 5, that left numbers of strikers dead and injuries on both sides. In reaction, on July 16, the Teamsters struck all of San Francisco, and "the first general strike since 1919 began in America." The Hearst papers blamed "Commie" front organizers (Harry Bridges, head of the I.L.A. was a professed Communist), and, though the number of communists among union members was, in fact, very small, the "Red Terror" scare finally succeeded in breaking the strike (72).

Committed to the recognition of the unacknowledged rights of labor, Tillie Lerner was active in these unionizing efforts and, as she reports in the first of the subsequent articles, was eventually rounded up with three others ("Billy, Jack, Dave") in an apartment that served as an organizing center. Her *New Republic* article (following one by Edmund Wilson[66] on Michelet)

begins with the following heading: "It was Lincoln Steffens who commanded me to write this story. 'People don't know,' he informed me, "how they arrest you, what they say, what happens in court. Tell them. Write it just as you told me about it." So here it is. (67)

With this comment on its inception, Tillie Lerner's testimony proceeds, in reportorial detail and slanted language, to an account of their treatment at the hands of local police and ends on a disingenuous note. She chronicles the raid by "bulls," their faces "distorted and bestial . . . [with] small pig eyes," and swears no surprise had they been tortured or shot. Witness to the questioning from an adjoining room, and to the blows when queries were met with silence--Were you born in Russia? Are you a Communist? Who is the girl? Where do you live?--she quotes repeated racist insinuations: "'Come on--lie, we know you're Jews or greasers or niggers'" (68).

When questioned herself, she gave a false name--"Teresa Lansdale"--and address--"to protect my family." All four suspects were finally arrested on vagrancy charges, jailed, convicted, and fined $1000 each. With no more proof of party affiliation than guilt by association, the judge lectured her on ingratitude for her "free education": "'[Y]ou decided our ideas weren't good enough, and you became a Communist.'" She records her answer: "'No, not then: It's since my free education gleaned during the last few days [in jail] that I've got leanings in that direction'" (69).

"The Strike," a second report published in the Sept.-Oct., 1934 issue of *Partisan Review*, begins "on a battlefield," in the midst of the violence surrounding the longshoremen's organizing effort. A preamble, which suggests the point of view, not yet distanced, in "I Stand Here Ironing," complains:

> . . . You leave me only this night to drop the bloody garment of Todays, to cleave through the gigantic events that have crashed one upon the other, to the first beginning. If I could go away for a while, if there were time and quiet . . . [a]ll that has happened might resolve into order and sequence, fall into neat patterns of words. I could stumble back into the past and slowly, painfully rear the structure . . . [as] the terror and significance of those days, would enter your heart and sear it forever with the vision. (3)

Tillie Lerner has already in place here, as "behind the smoke, the days whirl, confused as dreams," her own reading of the limitations that face the interpreter.

She continues, nonetheless, to catalogue events, employing, first, repetition for emphasis in the search "to get it right"; second, personification to embody the predatory power that threatens the current efforts at union organizing; and, third, tableaux settings that fix compelling images in the minds of her readers. She remembers how she first heard the history of the struggle through the testimony of a friend: ". . . for 12 years now. But we're through sweating blood, loading cargo five times the weight we should carry, we're through standing morning after morning like slaves in a slave market begging for a bidder. . ." (3). With concrete detail, her imagination transforms combatants into natural phenomena surrounding the docks:

> The port dead but for the rat stirring of a few scabs at sight, the port paralyzed, gummed on one side by the thickening scum of prostrate ships, islanded on the other by the river of pickets streaming ceaselessly up and down, a river that sometimes raged into a flood, surging of the wavering shoreline of police, battering into piers and sucking under the scabs in its angry tides. (3)

Amid refrains--Hell Can't Stop," "Get out of here," "General Strike"--and the staccato of "Law and Order," the atrocities committed by the Industrial Association are catalogued: "the still smiling lips . . . bared into a growl of open hatred, exposing the naked teeth of guns and tear gas" bring sympathizers down to the front, "shaken with fury at the police, the papers, the shipowners . . . trying to read the lesson the moving bodies underneath are writing. . ." (5). Women and children demonstrate in support of the stevedors, while "song flaming up from downstairs [is] answered . . . echoed across the gallery, solidarity weaving us all into one being . . . lifted on a sea of affection" (4). Olsen's commitments--to try to understand, to learn, to teach--are at work here, and song (mirror of the community sing in "Tell Me a Riddle") instigates communal awareness and action.

As violence escalates between police and strikers, "a light, indescribably green and ominous was cast over everything" (reminiscent of the "Bulkhead sign bile green" in "Hey Sailor"), while the parade of events gathers momentum: "Trucks rumbled . . . boys sitting on them like corpses . . . holding guns stiffly . . . wide frightened eyes . . . to sell out their

brothers and sisters for $2.00 a day" (7-8). The description continues: "There was a voice" that attested to the manner of life and of dying of each victim of a recent sidewalk massacre. The subsequent procession attracted thousands: "I saw the people, I saw the look . . . I saw the fists clenched . . ."--in repetitive phrases, a litany of memories. Finally, "a pregnant women standing on a corner, outlined against the sky, and she might have been a marble, rigid, eternal, expressing some vast and nameless sorrow. But her face was a flame . . .'We'll not forget'. . ." (8-9). Her lyricism and care for detail have yet to find artistic distance here, but the strategies of her rhetorical style are in place.

With a last reference to the impossibility of capturing the scene--"the rest, the General Strike, the terror, arrests and jail, the songs in the night, must be written later. . . but there is so much happening now. . . ." (9)--the essay ends in an expression of ambiguous wonder, its issues unresolved. Burkom and Williams point out how early "Olsen is pulled toward the communal, political world and equally toward the self-absorbed, solitary artist's life," in a "Yeatsian view in which beauty and terror occur simultaneously" (73-74). However, for Olsen the terror is never subsumed by the aesthetic; and beauty, never justified for its own sake.

Burkom and Williams also report that the Oct./Nov., 1935 issue of *The Anvil: The Proletariat Fiction Magazine*[67] announced for their next issue a novelette by Tillie Olsen, but the magazine failed, and "Skeleton Children" reached print only some forty years later, presumably as Chapter Five of *Yonnondio.* However, between the publication of her protest poems and her essays on the strike, Tillie Lerner's first work of fiction, "The Iron Throat," did appear, in the *New Republic* (April/May, 1934). Begun as it had been two years before, during her convalescence in Nebraska and Minnesota, this truncated effort at full-length fiction so impressed publishers Bennett Cerf and Donald Klopfer (Modern Library) that, according to Erika Duncan, they offered the promising young writer a monthly stipend per chapter. It was then that she sent her daughter back to the family and went to Los Angeles to write, but she could not stand the separation, nor did her commitment to write about and organize among the agricultural workers of the valley, mostly Mexican, help to advance work on the novel. Once returned to San Francisco and reunited with Karla, she did, however, produce what appeared decades later as *Yonnondio* ("Coming of Age" 212-13).

According to Burkom and Williams' somewhat contradictory report, Robert Cantwell praised "The Iron Throat" (in the *New Republic* of July 25, 1934) as "a work of early genius," calling the "'21 year old girl a stronger writer than Elizabeth Maddox Roberts,'" and later claimed that four editors and a literary agent had been in search of her, as well, but that she could not be located during the events surrounding the Maritime Strike (72). It is certain, in any case, that following this productive period, Lerner entered a literary silence of some twenty years. Most researchers write that she married Jack Olsen in 1936; others record that their wedding occurred in Grace Cathedral in 1944, just before he left for the war. They had three daughters (in addition to Karla), born in 1938, 1943, and 1948, and the family made their home in St. Francis Square, a union-organized experiment in co-operative living. While raising her children, Tillie Olsen supplemented their income by working as waitress, shaker in a laundry, transcriber in a dairy equipment company, and Kelly Girl. She later commented in *Silences* that she, like Hawthorne, Melville, and many only potential writers, never heard from, found commerce antithetical to the creative process.

Life and Writings of the 60's Through the 80's

Finally, when her enrollment at San Francisco State, and her subsequent fellowship at Stanford under a Ford Foundation Grant, issued in the series of stories eventually collected as *Tell Me a Riddle* (1956-62), Tillie Lerner reappeared in print as Tillie Olsen. More recognition followed:

1961	O. Henry Award for *Riddle*
1962-64	Radcliffe Institute Fellow: Independent Study
1967	Grant: National Endowment for the Arts
1969-70	Teaching appointments: Amherst, U. Mass.
1970-71	and Stanford
1972-73	McDowell County Grant: NE artists' retreat
1973	Writer in Residence: M.I.T.
1973-74	Distinguished Visiting Professor: U. Mass.

1975	Literary Award: American-Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters
1976	Guggenheim Fellowship
1978	Regents Visiting Lecturer: U. C. San Diego
1980	International Visiting Scholar: Four Scandanavian universities

Tillie Olsen's publishing career paralleled these awards and appointments, beginning with reflections on her long literary hiatus, "Silences: When Writers Don't Write," an essay published in Oct., 1965, in *Harpers Magazine* (later reprinted in *Silences*). With this non-fiction analysis of literary creativity and criticism, Olsen began her notable and influential support of those struggling "to come to the writing."

Selma Burkom and Margaret Williams, along with Elaine Neil Orr, assign the theme, "reclamation," to these later works which span two decades and encompass a wide variety of literary genres, all focused on the discovery, releasing, and support of creative expression among the unheard and yet unvoiced:

1965	"Silences: When Writers Don't Write"	An Essay
1970	"Requa I"	A Short Story
1972	"Women Who Are Writers in Our Century"	An Essay
1972	"A Biographical Interpretation: Rebecca Harding Davis"	An Afterward
1972-73	Tillie Olsen's Reading List"	A Bibliography
1974	*Yonnondio*	A Novel
1978	*Silences*	A Non-Fiction Collection
1984	*Mother to Daughter/Daughter to Mother: A Day Book*	An Edited Collection

Although it did not appear until 1978, *Silences* collects the essays that initiated Olsen's most recent publications and is, therefore, an appropriate beginning for the analysis of the period.

The collection opens with an epigram from Thomas Hardy's: *Jude the Obscure*: "[T]his is sent out to those into whose souls the iron has entered, and has entered deeply at some time of

their lives." Her acknowledgments reflect the same point of view: first, to a list of intimates, "For remaining, reminding . . . All earth and air for years, now.' Shine on me still'"; and then,

> To the unnamed here, whose work and beings are also sustenance; among them those whose life coursings have schooled me ineradicably in the shaping power and inequality of circumstance; beginning when I was a child at Kellom and Long Schools in Omaha and crossed the tracks to Central High School (my first College-of-Contrast).

These personal references follow an enumeration of her many sources for this study of "the unnatural thwarting of what struggles to come into being, but cannot . . . when the seed strikes stone; the soil will not sustain; the spring is false; the time is drought or blight or infestation; the frost comes premature" (24). Beyond those images from nature, the definition of her subject is concern with "the relationship of circumstances--including class, color, age,and sex; the times climate into which one is born"--to the creation of literature, and with "silenced people, century after century their beings consumed in hard, everyday essential work of maintaining human life. Their art, which still they made--as their contributions--anonymous, refused respect, recognition; lost."

These reflections appear on unnumbered pages that precede the Table of Contents, many of them quotations from within the work, and close with a summary comment;

> long in accumulation, garnered over fifty years, near a lifetime; the thought came slow, hard-won; the talks and essay, the book itself, elicited.
>
> A passion and a purpose inform its pages: love for my incomparable medium, literature; hatred for all that, societally rooted, unnecessarily lessens and denies it; slows, impairs, silences writers.
>
> It is written to re-dedicate and encourage. *I intend to bring you strength, joy, courage, perspicacity, defiance.* Andre Gide

The resentment and despair familiar to thwarted creativity do not constitute the governing moods in this anthology.

The collection proper begins with two talks, the first,"Silences: When Writers Don't Write," given at the Radcliffe Institute in 1962 to a weekly colloquium, and published originally

in 1965 in *Harpers Magazine*; the second, "Women Who Are Writers in Our Century: One Out of Twelve," presented at the MLA Forum on Women Writers, 1971, and the next year published in the "Women Writing, Women Teaching" issue of *College English*. The former catalogues a long series of both the great and the yet-to-be-discovered, noting how circumstance deterred their artistic effort: Thomas Hardy's "thirty year ceasing from novels after the Victorian vileness to his *Jude*"; Gerald Manly Hopkins' "religious vow to refrain from poetry"; Herman Melville's "it will not pay" and refusal for thirty years to publish "a final hash" that would; Theodore Dreiser's and Fedor Dostoyevski's suffering under censorship; Isaac Babel's and Oscar Wilde's imprisonment, the latter "not permitted even a pencil until the last month" (24-26).

Olsen also quotes testimony on the conditions necessary for creativity, such as Henry James' "depth and continuity of attention and meditation," and Joseph Conrad's "even flow of daily life, made easy and noiseless by a silent, watchful, tireless affection" (30). Thomas Mann called the task a "Gethsemane"; Melville, the product of one "wholly surrendered and dedicated" (30). She ends this enumeration with women writers who, for the most part, never married, married late, had only one child, or had a household staff. These accomplished authors are then contrasted with those "traditionally trained to place others' needs first, . . . making it possible for others to use their abilities" and subject to "distraction, not meditation, . . . interruption, not continuity; spasmodic, not constant toil" (37). Her personal commitment becomes clear also: "writing, the hope of it, was the air I breathed . . . storing, snatched reading, beginnings of writing, and always 'the secret rootlet, of reconnaissance'" (37). She chronicles:

> . . . [T]he writing, which I was somehow able to carry around with me through work, through home. Time on the bus, even when I had to stand, was enough; the stolen moments at work, enough; the deep night hours for as long as I could stay awake, . . . after the household tasks were done. . . . [But eventually t]he fifteen hours of daily realities became too much distraction . . . I lost craziness of endurance. What might have been, I don't know; but I applied for, and was given, eight months' writing time. There was still full family life, . . . but I did not have to hold an eight-hour job. I had continuity, three full days, sometimes

more--and it was in those months I made the mysterious turn and became a writing writer. (38)

Images from both "I Stand Here Ironing" and "Tell Me a Riddle" echo in these reminiscences.

The frustrations returned--"always roused by the writing, always denied. . . . So long they fed each other--my life, the writing--;--the writing or hope of it, my life--; but now they begin to destroy" (38-39). She observes that the Ford grant came "almost too late," and that freedom may not coincide with readiness; but "the habits of creation were at last rewon, one book went to the publisher, and I dared to begin my present work." For her the conditions necessary for creation are "flame on flame; and time as needed, afterwards; and enough of the self, the capacities, undamaged for the rebeginnings of the frightful task" (39-40). With the mentors from her craft, she agrees, that "the mysterious turn" is not enough, but that a writer is also always aware of "Gethsemane," of "what is lost" (40). Sally Cunneen reports a statement Olsen made at a public reading about her writing self--"You see, I am a destroyed person"--but Cunneen goes on to affirm Olsen's continuing "commitment to those who went before, voiceless, and to those who need to be encouraged. . ." (573).

Other critics comment on Olsen's self-assessment, including Sandy Boucher in a 1974 issue of *Ms.* After acknowledging Olsen's belief that she is "a survivor, any woman who writes is a survivor," Boucher states "In all this teaching, speaking, writing, Tillie has tried to bring to focus how much strength and dedication and creativeness there is in the work of women, in the 'ordinary' lives . . . defends the right of this experience to be accorded its place in literature, and works to bring it there, in everything she does" (29). Like Boucher, David Dillon recognizes the reclamation theme in *Silences* in his 1979 *Southwest Review* article, "Art and Daily Life in Conflict," while insistently crediting the breadth of its application in Olsen's treatment. He observes that *Silences*, much of it written in the early 60's before the present women's movement was well underway, is "about a writer's problem, not just a woman's problem," and finds "[w]hat remains fresh and compelling is Tillie Olsen herself. Angry, sensitive and persistent, she has managed to create enduring literature under the most unpromising

circumstances. Among women writers, she is something of a saint, although she has done her best to avoid canonization" (106).

In a second essay at the opening of the collection, revised and reprinted as "One Out of Twelve: Writers Who Are Women in Our Century," Olsen concentrates specifically on the feminist issue, reflected in publication statistics in this century. Originally an unwritten talk presented at the 1971 MLA convention, her analysis begins with an informal survey (conducted without benefit of secretary or computer) which indicates that one out of four or five writers are women today, mostly as a result of increased opportunity for education, work experience, political participation, and labor-saving devices. Further, she recognizes the research done by Virginia Woolf on precursors of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries by whom "the road was cut"--Fanny Burney, Aphra Behn, Jane Austen, the Brontës, George Eliot. But she finds no explanation for the far fewer "one in twelve" (or 8%) women listed in college bibliographies, or for such sanguine remarks as Diana Trilling's--that "biological aspects" are the possible cause (42-44).

The balance of the essay examines cultural conditioning, that *"differing past of women"* as she calls it, that underlies the present, and historical, situation: toilsome, exhausting labor; repressive religion; trivializing social images and demeaning nurture; thwarted assertiveness, sexuality and expressivenesss; and teaching that instills self-doubt and loss of aspiration. She observes that, without support, either domestic help or a competent "wife," women become "the angel in the house" of Virginia Woolf's famous analogy, and suffer devaluation, dismissal, restrictions, constriction, and arid company with no audience"--in other words, "a kind of death" (45-64).

The solution, as addressed to her original audience: "You who teach, read writers who are women . . . in our infinite variety," both established and new; and "[t]each women's lives through the lives of the women who wrote the books themselves, and through autobiography, biography, journals, and letters." She further urges academics to add to the literature "about the few, . . . books closer to the lives of the many, naming three that are out of paperback print (Harriette Arnow's *The Dollmaker*, Elizabeth Madox Roberts' *Time of Man*, Grace Paley's *Little Disturbances*) and also Agnes Smedley's *Daughter of Earth*, "out of print, unread,

unknown for forty years" (64). A footnote informs the reader, "In 1976 these books are all back in print." Having also acknowledged the role of honest criticism, she calls, in addition, for the effort to "help [t]o create writers," especially among students who are the first generation of their families to come to college. Quoting Virginia Woolf again, in her preface to *Life As We Have Known It, Memoirs of the Working Woman's Guild,* she closes: "'Whether that is literature, or whether that is not literature, I will not presume to say, but that it explains much and tells much, that is certain'"--all in defense of what may be "the soil, too, of great literature" (65)

Silences includes, besides these two republished essays, Tillie Olsen's Afterward for the 1971 Feminist Press reprint of Rebecca Harding Davis' *Life in the Iron Mills: or, The Korl Woman.* (An excerpt of Davis' novel appears at the end of the volume, pp 289-309.) It is at the close of this literary biography that Olsen describes her own 1928 discovery of an 1861 bound copy of the *Atlantic Monthly* which contained the work. Thus confirmed, at fifteen, in her desire to write "of the lives of despised people," she confesses that she had not

> envisioned writing of [Davis herself] until Florence Howe and Paul Lauter, to whom I had introduced *Life in the Iron Mills,* suggested that the Feminist Press issue it and I write the afterward. . . . I have brought to her life and work my understanding as writer, as insatiable reader, as feminist, as woman. (140)

The roles she identifies with here are revealing, in regard not only to her critical approach, but also as self-assessment. She apologizes for what is primarily "biographical interpretation and history ('human story')," then states, "I am convinced that that is what is most needed" (141). Finally, she acknowledges that her essay lacks formal citation and explains, "I was [for years] reading for myself only, and had had no academic training in notation" (141). Her lack of formal education, coupled with her awareness of the handicaps that have resulted, suggest both modesty about her work and the determination required to overcome such limitations in order to communicate "for the voiceless," on behalf of "the yet unheard." The informative quality and extent of this seventy-five page Afterward vindicates the courage of this "writer . . . reader . . . feminist . . . woman."

Olsen claims that before Rebecca Harding Davis "there had been no Blakean dark Satanic mills in American literature; outside of slavery, no working people whose lives were 'tragedy

. . . a reality of soul starvation . . . living death'" (68).[68] She sees Davis, daughter of a wealthy West Virginia business man, as the first to counter in literature the American Dream--"the right to rise"--with the challenge, "'What are rights without means?'" Purveyor of this dilemma in Davis' earliest fiction is Hugh Wolfe, "consumptive puddler in a steel mill," whose "thirst for beauty" leads him to sculpt "crude, powerful shapes out of the pig iron waste," one "a giant korl woman":

> "She be hungry," he tries to explain to Kirby and his party of sightseers who are "of the mysterious class . . . of another order of being." "Not hungry for meat . . . summat to make her live . . . like you. . . . Whiskey ull do it, in a way."
>
> "Boy, you have it in you to be a great sculptor," Wolfe is told: "Make yourself what you will. It is your right." When the question of means arises, the admirer shortly explains that exercise of rights depends on money. And adds: "Why should one be raised, when myriads are left." (68-69)

Davis wrote, according to Olsen's account, "in secret and in isolation [as] a thirty-year-old unmarried woman who lived far from literary circles, and was creating without precedent or sponsorship" (67). Published anonymously by the *Atlantic Monthly*,[69] this work "won instant fame" and then was lost. For, though encouraged by her editors and by a visit to Boston and Concord where she met the New England literary coterie of the mid-century (among whom it was Hawthorne whose attitudes toward her and toward literature impressed her), she never fulfilled the literary promise of *Life in the Iron Mills*. Olsen analyzes how this loss occurred.

The prevailing condescension toward women writers and the press of domestic expectations once Harding married were primary deterrents to authorship, according to Olsen's investigation: "Men could have love, home, children, and work, without cost to the work. Not women" (126). Though she continued to write, encouraged by her husband who was an editor, the quality of her fiction declined, and this failure is carefully documented in the themes of her later fiction and in her letters and journals, the focus of Olsen's essay. Thus her own theme--the tie between creative expression and human development--she finds confirmed in Rebecca Harding Davis' career, and Olsen's commitment to change those conditions that thwart such an artist is advanced. As Sally Cunneen observes, "[i]t is that vision which is [also] the final and

essential ingredient in the power her stories convey. It fuses her personal commitment as an artist with her life commitment to those who went before, voiceless, and those who need to be encouraged to use their voices in the future" (573). Ellen Cronin Rose, in an article entitled "Limning: Or Why Tillie Olsen Writes" puts it another way: . . . . one of the special handicaps of the woman writer, confined traditionally to her proper sphere in the drawing room or the kitchen, is that she is restricted to what Olsen calls 'trespass vision' of the world beyond that sphere. . ." (3). Tillie Olsen confirms this view with one of Davis' later stories:

> Aside from any light or dark that it casts on factors in Rebecca's breakdown, "The Wife's Story" is important (and fascinating) for the detailing of this anguish, the working woman's "conflict" in the insoluble situation of commitment to the real need of other human beings and the real need to carry one's other serious work as well. The literature of this anguish is sparse. "The Wife's Story" is the first, and still among the most revealing. (111)

But "the creative eye" is not only wide-ranging, reportorial, and observational. Using Hugh Wolfe as metaphor for the artistic visionary, Cunneen cites his "'hewing and hacking with his blunt knife'" to uncover "the meaning and shape within.'" It is, in particular, for this capacity--to look beneath the squalor and discover the struggle for expression and growth within --that Tillie Olsen appreciates Rebecca Harding Davis; and Davis' influence upon Olsen's own development, in turn, is implicit. Olsen, then, completes her survey of Davis' later work with a claim: to "an untraced indebtedness to her in the rise of realism. She maintained that fiction which incorporated social and economic problems directly, *and in terms of their effects on human beings*" (139).

The final series of writings in *Silences* includes quotations from famous writers--their journals, fiction, and poetry--about the resources that ground creativity. The list is long (even excluding authors already quoted) and suggests the scope of Olsen's reading and research: Jane Austen, the Brontës, William Blake, George Herbert, Rainer Maria Rilke, Honore de Balzac, Elizabeth Gaskell, Franz Kafka, Collette, Willa Cather, Norman Mailer, Jorge Luis Borges, Kathe Kollwitz, Margaret Walker, Andre Gide, Paul Valery, Vincent Van Gogh, Margaret

Atwood, Elaine Showalter, Mary Ellmann. The litany suggests with what persistence and range Tillie Olsen has pursued both the silenced, and those who are survivors.

Ending these observations by writers and artists of three centuries, she returns to the comparison between "trespass vision" and "circumference": "Trespass vision cannot make circumference. Nor can the most ascendant imagination. Vision must have a place from which (as well as a territory) to observe. Imagination must have freedom, velocity--and ground from which to soar" (270). For Olsen, as for all writers she insists, "being one on whom nothing is lost" is not sufficient.

Citing three further constrictions upon women writers--"writing like a man," "writing like a woman," and "confinement to biological woman"--she identifies the stereotypes that have limited their expression. Having to adopt male pseudonyms in order to publish at all, women found their deception compounded by the points of view of conventional culture that dictated glorification of male characters and simultaneous denigration of females. For representing women as contingent, primarily receptive foils for the self-realizing role of men in society placed restrictions on the depth and scope of description in treating female experience in general. But Olsen defines the core of the problem of constriction as "fear" and "love": "the need to please, to be safe,"--which she claims is a well-founded fear because power is still in the hands of men for "validation, publication, approval, reputation, coercions, penalties"--and "the need to love and be loved" (280-81). In this last, she finds what is unique and most intransigent in the oppression of women:

> that portion of the harm which comes to us from the beings we are close to, who are close to us. Their daily part in the balks, lessenings, denials. Which we must daily encounter. . . .
>
> How to separate out the chains from the bonds, the harms from the value, the truth from the lies. (211)

She believes that in a "maiming sex-class-race world," achievement continues "at the cost of others' needs," and she closes

> (And where there are children. . . . And where there are children. . . .)
>
> Leechings, balks, encumbrances.
>
> AND YET THE TREE DID--DOES--BEAR FRUIT. (281)

Significantly, her final observation about what she calls "the freedom not to lie" couples concern for "the children" with hope. During the period of publication of these essays in social and literary criticism, she was also compiling an instrument for change in departments of literature and their curricula. Titled "Tillie Olsen's Reading List,"[70] it contains, like the references in *Silences*, the fruit of fifty years of reading and research among women writers--the well-known, the re-discovered (like Rebecca Harding Davis), and the only recently published. The list first appeared in a four-part series in the *Women's Studies Newsletter*, 1972-74, and its subsequent influence on the curricula of departments of English was evidenced in expanded bibliographies and syllabi. Recognition of Tillie Olsen's contributions to curriculum development occurred in the Presidential address at the 88th Annual Convention of the MLA on December 27, 1973 (reported in *PMLA*., May, 1974). Florence Howe's theme on that occasion was the declining numbers of course offerings and of enrollments in literature departments across the country, and the resulting need for re-examination of the relevance of curricula for contemporary education. Using as one of her sources Paulo Freire's discoveries while teaching among the illiterate poor of Brazil,[71] she defined literacy as "the power to name the world through the word," identifying further the influence of the literary curriculum as "political": "We teach a world view" (438). Howe quoted, as well, a letter written by a Jewish factory worker in New York City, complaining about the alienation she felt in the classroom, and advocated the need to "'provide courage in their heart for struggle'"--an idea which echoed for her Adrienne Rich's 1971 address, to the same audience, on "revisioning." Rich had described "the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction" and had called it, according to Howe, "an act of survival," with the injuction to include the invisible majority, as well as the elite male, white, wealthy, and educated minority, as reference (440). Florence Howe concludes with the following tribute, noted in the *PLMA* report:

> This talk could not have been written without the women's movement, the MLA's Commission on the Status of Women, the Women's Caucus for Modern Languages, and the special support of my friends at the Feminist Press and of Louis Kempf. I want to dedicate the talk to my students, to Paul Lauter, and to

> Tillie Olsen, the teacher of us all. Her fiction, her life, and her learning sustain us and inspire us to continue the work she has begun. (241)

The quotation from David Dillon, cited earlier, serves to correct what can become a distortion of her feminist role, identifying her focus upon "a writer's problem, not just a woman's" (see p. 266).

Beyond the "Reading List"; her two poems; the exposés on labor-organizing; and the two addresses, the Afterward and the additions that became *Silences*, Tillie Olsen also published two works of fiction following *Tell Me a Riddle*. Begun in 1931 or 1932, when Tillie Lerner was only nineteen, abandoned in 1936, and rediscovered, reassembled, and published, finally, in 1974, *Yonnondio: From the Thirties* is her earliest fiction and only novel, while "Requa I," published four years earlier, in 1970, is her last. (The 1984 publication, *Mother to Daughter, Daughter to Mother,* is collected and edited by Olsen). A comparison of these two works of fiction is an appropriate close to this survey of her writing and her critics.

Erika Duncan provides the setting for *Yonnondio* with her biographical account, "Coming of Age in the Thirties." Though unfinished, Duncan writes, *Yonnondio* "yet bespeaks the consciousness and roots of that decade." Commenting upon the novel as incomplete, she observes that, beyond their beginnings in the Wyoming mining town of the '20's, the interval on a Dakota farm, and their years in a "back-of-the-yards" neighborhood of Omaha, its children are never orphaned nor trained as the Communist organizers they were originally destined to become. Yet, she contends, perhaps for that very reason, because it is so much a book about that "sense of human potential" so central to Tillie Olsen's life philosophy and so essential to what was most noble in firing the "political activity of the thirties, the very unfinished, not-yet-grown-up quality of this book . . . renders it, in impact--if not in realized form and content--the very epic it was meant to be" (218). In fact, interruption and incompletion characterize much of Olsen's work: "The Strike" could not be sufficiently distanced to analyze; the narrator in "I Stand Here Ironing" is unable to "sift" and "total"; Whitey disappears into "the waves" and Carol, into a truncated conversation; the old woman's destination remains a mystery; and "Requa II" is yet to be written. Whether these limitations are fortuitous, as Duncan seems to suggest in

regard to *Yonnondio*, or even unconsciously deliberate, they raise an interesting question for genre criticism.

Once asked whether she was tempted to complete the novel, Olsen answered by relating its original imagery to a later era. According to Duncan, "Only once in the late forties, after the bombing of Hiroshima, she found herself recording a strong image of herself and the decay, of "ashes to ashes and dust to dust, and wind endlessly blowing the dust that had been Anna and Mazie and Jim, endless terrible dust storms swirling in my head" (218- 19). Her sense of her characters' continuity with on-going history is testimony to the intertextuality of her life and works. During this period, not only were her writings and, consequently, her characters' political development deferred, but also her feeling about the Communist Party changed. Duncan reports Olsen's comments on the implications of this shift: "'Toward the end of the thirties . . . I had a different understanding of the ways in which the party was so wrong in how it handled people . . . [and] did not allow for a development from actual United States events and needs'"(219).[72] In fact, she left the Party, but continued to believe in its policy "to try to prevent World War II, to stop the Fascist Nazi powers and colonization," and to promote social security, welfare, and union organizations. Further, she claimed never to have become disillusioned about "human beings' capacities to make necessary changes by working together, while simultaneously life continued to remind her how difficult any human ventures are, even individual relationships and families, let alone political movements" (219-20). The shift in focus, through *Yonnondio* to *Tell Me a Riddle* attests to this double awareness: faith in human corporate ingenuity and respect for the challenge of change.

She also knew that, although writers like Steinbeck no longer recorded the fact, the encounter with injustice was not over in such places as the California valley, for

> . . . the fame and the Nobel Prize "were not because of *Grapes of Wrath*, but because of the millions of human beings who made struggles of this kind and themselves visible. [Without them] the WPA Writers' project, many books, photographs and films would never have come into being. James Agee and Walker Evans would never have gone south and given us their imperishable *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. They, almost alone, brought to their work the rare

mixture of quality, identification, and torment--torment because they knew they were only 'tourists' [who would] leave the people about whom they wrote in their unchanged lives." (Duncan 220)

Many observed the unique sensitivity and respect for their subject inherent in the work of Agee and Evans.[73]

So it was that Olsen, inspired by her reading of Rebecca Harding Davis, chose the title of Walt Whitman's "lament for the aborigines" for her exposé of the Holbrook family's victimization:

(Race of the woods, the landscape free, and the falls!
No picture, poem, statement, passing them to the
future:)
Yonnondio! Yonnondio!--unlimned they disappear;
Today gives place, and fades--the cities, farms,
factories fade;
A muffled sonorous sound, a wailing word is born
through the air for a moment,
Then blank and gone and still, and utterly lost.

Duncan calls the novel that Tillie Olsen conceived on the basis of Whitman's theme a "portrait of the artist as a young woman," a 1930's version of "On the Road," chronicle of the destruction of a family by an oppressive economic system. It was also the young Tillie Lerner's intention that it become a manifesto for union organizing and for the rebirth of a political conscience in industrialized America.

Similarly, John Alfred Avant's *New Republic* review describes the Holbrooks as "Olsen's aborigines . . . the archetypal poor family of American fiction." Their struggle to survive life as exploited labor in a company town, as failing tenant farmers, and as cogs in the production line of a meat-packing plant leads only to "defeat [that] has no tinge of triumph" (28). As in Davis' work,

[l]yrically brutal scenes are followed by pleas that the reader connect these lives with his own. Sentences break off midway; transitions are surprisingly abrupt.

But what is a losing struggle with words in Davis is distinctively rhythmic in Olsen. *Yonnondio*, whose language is often achingly beautiful, is an elegy that acts on the reader indirectly by its emotional suggestiveness. (28)

Having assessed the content and style of the work, Avant joins other critics, however, in criticizing its shift in point of view, from the six-year-old Maizie as raisonneur in its earliest chapters to Anna, her defeated mother, in many of the crisis scenes after the family settles in the city. As a result, Avant believes, Olsen fails to "fully embody her vision of hope within hopelessness, of beauty in the midst of ugliness" (29). Knowing Tillie Olsen's aversion to romantic aestheticism, the shift appears consistent with her intention. Avant contends, in any case, that the effort is "flawed but extraordinary."

For Ellen Cronin Rose, on the other hand, *Yonnondio* is not so much "a protest, but a perception," by an author who hears the condition of those "immured in immanence" (9-11). From *The Hollins Critic*, her "Limning: Or Why Tillie Writes" compares Olsen's approach to that of Davis' sculptor, Hugh Wolfe, cutting away the squalor to perceive the shape and direction within it. Thus Hugh's "crouching figure of a woman, with outstretched arms," carved from the korl of an iron mine, is precursor to Anna, mute, thwarted in her hopes for her children, given a voice only through Olsen's prose.Rose concludes: "*Yonnondio!* That evocative word is the emblem of Tillie Olsen's aesthetic. It is her plea, and her pledge: that the unobserved should be perceived, that the fleeting should be fixed, that the inarticulate [sic] should come to writing" (13).[74] Rose's analysis of her view of aesthetics is congruent with Olsen's own.

Deborah Rosenfelt, writing another "From the Thirties" survey of Olsen's early work for a 1981 *Feminist Studies'* article subtitled "Tillie Olsen and the Radical Tradition," distinguishes what was utilized and what abandoned from her socialist roots. Cultivated by her family's political commitment and encouraged by such organizations as the John Reed Clubs, Olsen gained recognition with significant Leftist leaders, among them Lincoln Steffens[75] and John Strachey, whom she met in Carmel, California, and from such groups as the American Writers' Conference,[76] which she attended in New York City in 1935. A sketch of her, "lean, intense," appears in a *New Masses* article covering the conference, in which she is identified with Mike Gold, James Farrell, Nelson Algren, and Richard Wright. Rosenfelt notes as well the

significance of Bennett Cerf's offer of support for *Yonnondio*, though it never came to fruition. Thus, though the Left of the thirties monopolized her time with organizing efforts and tended to be narrowly perscriptive and masculinist in its view of literature, according to Rosenfelt, still it valued the contribution of artists, deepened their perspective, and offered the possibility of publication, including examination of women's issues. Rosenfelt traces how, under its influence, Olsen developed her already critical social awareness, especially of women's double oppression, both economic and sexist, as she struggled to write politically conscious fiction that was, at the same time, non-polemical. A journal entry, written in Faribault, Minnesota, as she began *Yonnondio*, reveals the intensity of her response to this early shaping: "'O Mazie and Will and Ben. At last I write out all that has festered in me so long--the horror of being a working-class child--and the heroism, all the respect they deserve" (399).

Rosenfelt's analysis includes also the observation that although *Yonnondio* offers political injunctions to young workers who will someday unite in revolution--"millions of fists clamped in yours"; (79) "till the day that hands will find a way to speak" (95)--still the overall texture and tone of the novel are "more lyrical, less didactic" (393). She uses as an example a scene, quoted by most critics of the novel, in which Anna and the children have wandered into another part of the city in search of nourishing dandelion greens. Though weak, the desperate mother is transported by the changed surroundings, becoming, momentarily, a stranger to Mazie:

> "We'll set awhile. My head is balloony. . . . She staggered, put her arms around Mazie, sang:
>
> O Shenandoah I love her daughter
> I'll bring her safe through stormy water
>
> smiled so radiantly, Mazie's heart leapt. Arm in arm, they sat down under the catalpa. That look was on her mother's face again, her eyes so shining and remote. She began stroking Mazie's hair . . . [a] fragile old remembered comfort streamed from the stroking fingers into Mazie, gathered to some shy bliss . . . over suppurating hurt and want and fear and shamings--the Harm of years. River wind shimmered and burnished the bright grasses. . . . [y]oung catalpa leaves overhead quivered and glistened. . . .

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. (118-19)

In Park-Fuller's terms, this episode marks a transformation, however fleeting, in which the threats of immanent thwarting and deprivation are balanced by awareness of another reality, expressed and thus freed to be appropriated.

The novel ends with another scene of affirmation, stolen from the searing heat of a summer night:

Ben shifts around to lie in Mazie's arms--not too close, for it is so hot. "Splain to me about bad dreams," he whispers into her ear, "tell me about boogie mans and scaredies and ghosts and hell."

Flies bumble and fry in the lamp; . . . Anna sits at last, holding Bess at the kitchen table, singing with heat-cracked lips "I Saw a Ship a-Sailing," waiting for Will to come home so that the lights can go out and the trying-to-sleep time can begin again. . . . It is all heat delirium and near suffocation now.

Bang!

Bess who has been fingering a fruit-jar lid--absently, heedlessly drops it--aimlessly groping across the table, reclaims it again. Lightning 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. . . . Centuries of human drive work in her; human ecstasy of achievement. . . . The fetid fevered air rings with

> Anna's, Mazie's, Ben's laughter; Bess's toothless, triumphant crow. Heat misery, rash misery transcended. (152-53)

Breaking into a world of threatening sights, sounds, smells, and feelings, such revivals of spirit come about through renewed connectedness with the earth, with human history and creation, with song, in Olsen's familiar themes. Rosenfelt speculates that one reason why her epic remained incomplete may have been that Olsen, though in touch with the systemic causes of human misery, could not satisfactorily reconcile polemic and poetry in her struggle to make fiction a form of action.

Catharine R. Stimpson, in a review in the *Nation*, describes Olsen's original poetic gift as an

> ability to render lyrically the rhythms of consciousness of victims. Imaginative, affectionate, they are also alert to the sensual promise of their surroundings. Harsh familial, political, and economic conditions first cramp, then maim, and then seek to destroy them. The fevers of poverty, dread and futility inflame their sensibilities. They risk reduction to defensive fantasy, pain, madness or cruelty. They remain, if in shadow, heroes and heroic. (565)

Also addressing this balance of lyricism and realism in *Yonnondio*, Rosenfelt believes, finally, that Olsen reaches the fullest expression of both protest and poetry when she focuses on the family, caught in a world of degrading work and false values, as a source still of both strength and love, and as a battleground. Though not until many years later, *Tell Me a Riddle* was to follow.

Linda Park-Fuller, on the other hand, applying her theory to *Yonnondio*, believes that Olsen seeks equilibrium in her characters' developing consciousness. Seeing the early work as depictions of a self-world dichotomy, she analyzes the Holbrook family's failure to realize economic and sexual equality as a hopeless attempt to equalize inner and outer pressures. The drive of the self to see, to say, to do and make goes on within each family member, but systems of oppression deplete and suffocate them, while barring access to sources of creativity, dignity and resilience. Thus Park-Fuller concentrates her analysis on failed attempts at breathing, listening, and taking in, within the text.

For example, the first chapter (including the portion published in 1934 as "The Iron Throat") depicts the life of the family in a Wyoming mining town through the eyes and ears of the six-year-old Maizie. It begins "The whistles always woke Maizie. They pierced into her sleep like some gutteral-voiced metal beast, tearing at her; breathing a terror. During the day if the whistle blew, she knew it meant death--somebody's poppa or brother, perhaps her own--in that fearsome place below the ground, the mine" (9). The novel exposes the degradation of the miners' families who suffer from oppressive bosses, deadly coal dust, and the fear of cave-ins. Maizie's young friend, just starting to work in the tunnels below ground, is addressed, in the narrator's voice, as one about to be smothered, defamed, robbed:

> Breathe and breathe. How fresh the night. But the air you will know will only be sour with sweat.
>
> . . .
>
> Breathe and breathe, Andy, turn your eyes to the stars. . . .
>
> You belong to a starless night now, unimaginably black. . . .
>
> And no more can you stand erect. You lose that heritage of man, too. You are brought now to fit earth's intestines, stoop like a hunchback. . . .
>
> Breathe and lift your face to the night, Andy Kvaternick. Trying so vainly in some inarticulate way to purge your bosom of the coal dust. . . . Your father had dreams too. The earth will take those. . . . (13-14)

Olsen's repetitive style intensifies the use here of direct address and injunction, as polemic and lyric tones combine.

Finally, another episode, still early in the work and part of the original "Iron Throat," focuses again on the young girl's sensitivity to the miner's risks as Maizie visualizes her momma, "always lookin as if she expects to hear something." While playing in a grove at the edge of town, where she has brought her younger brother, Will, and the baby, she is suddenly alerted, but intuits danger before she ever hears or sees it:

> . . . The tightness had come alive again; it strangled around her heart. She leapt to her feet with a cry, waking the baby. . . .

> She pointed Above the sky were ears In all their different shapes they coiled, blurred ears, listening And looking down, she saw that the wind was pitting the grasses and leaves, making little whirlpools, kitten-shaped ears, listening, listening The face of her mother, the face of Mis' Connors, the face of Mis' Tikas came like a mist before her eyes--listening, everywhere, everywhere
>
> Willie, let's go home, Willie
>
> The wind was icy on her running body, the baby dragged But everywhere the sky and earth were listening And the whistle--yes, it was the whistle that was shrieking--not the finger in her ear, not the wind
>
> "Let's run away, Will " A thought hung with bulldog teeth to her mind--"It'll be daddy this time "
>
> "Let's run away," but their feet were flying--flying to the tipple
>
> The women were there already Tearless faces, watching (29)

Maizie's thoughts, in the process of formation, confirm Park-Fuller's analysis of a consciousness, receiving impressions from the environment and attempting to right the balance of pressures, inside with outside, by finding words for impressions not yet articulated And the ear as metaphor for the pre-reflective function in art conveys also Maizie's intuition of danger

As a result of the cave-in, Jim Holbrook, caught underground for five days, resolves to move away as the family undertakes unimaginable economies "A new life in the spring But now fatback and cornmeal to eat Newspapers stuffed in shoes and the washing done without soap Somehow to skimp off of everything that has long ago been skimped on, somehow to find more necessities the body can do easiest without" (26) Finally, they can afford travel to a tenant farm in South Dakota where the release and freedom they experience--from fear and violence and confinement--is sweet but short-lived as a failed crop and the winter in a dugout sod house destroy their prospects of living off the land and drive them to the city

The balance of the novel is set in Omaha, Nebraska, where Jim finds work digging sewers, and then in a meat-packing plant Here the familiar sense of being stifled is magnified by summer heat in the packing-house-district slums and in the slaughtering and processing rooms of the plant

> And now the dog days are here, the white fierce heat throbbing, when breathing is the drawing in of a scorching flame , when the very young and the very old sicken and die, and the stench cooking down into the pavements and the oven houses throbs like a great wave of vomit in the air
>
> There in the packing houses the men and women somehow toil through Standing there, the one motion all day, their clothes salty with sweat, . the stink bellying up from the blood house and casings forces the beginning of a vomit, even on those who boasted they hadn't a smeller any more (129)

Anna suffers a miscarriage, Jim narrowly escapes from a packinghouse explosion, and hopes for their children's education fade when the school fails them As Jim tries to recover, making promises life will not allow him to keep, he senses that "things in his mind so vast and formless, so terrible and bitter will never be spoken--till the day that hands will find a way to speak this hands" (95) Nor is Anna ever completely restored from the depletion of too many babies and too little sustenance

> It was not any and it was all of these things that brought her now to swaying in the middle of the floor, twisting and twisting the rompers in soundless anguish It was that she felt so worn, so helpless, that it loomed gigantic beyond her, impossible ever to achieve, beyond, beyond any effort or doing of hers that task of making a better life for her children to which her being was bound (105)

According to Joan Wood Samuelson's research study, "Patterns of Survival," women writers of this period--Edith Summers Kelley (*Weeds* 1923), Agnes Smedley (*Daughters of Earth* 1929), Harriette Arnow (*The Dollmaker* 1954) and Tillie Olsen--incorporate "artistic value, sociological importance, and feminist perspective" in their efforts to give voice to the authenticity of the silenced For these writers not only describe historical social conditions in concrete terms, but,more important, "lived some aspect of the lives they portrayed" (5) Thus Adrienne Rich's concept of "re-visioning" becomes here feminist testimony to the effects of exploitative labor conditions and of patriarchal religious and family life, in particular on women and children

For Elaine Neil Orr, on the other hand, Olsen's earliest as well as most recent fiction is unique for her poetic rhythms that express powerful social protest, but also for a religious vision

Orr identifies Olsen's emphasis upon time and its reconstitution with her continual confusion of beauty and ugliness, the epiphanies of Mazie and Anna, even through pain It is from Olsen's realization of human interconnectedness and, thus, of human responsibility, that Orr draws her claim for religious consciousness in the novel She states, also, that the hope for renewal of life within Olsen's text finds its parallel in the rehabilitation of the text itself in 1974, the year of its eventual publication Incomplete and unrealized as the political epic it was meant to become, *Yonnondio* offers, nonetheless, convincing testimony not only to lives fragmented, brutalized, even destroyed by the twentieth century's ruthless systems of production, and by the subsequent failure of those same lives to realize the potential for creative expression, but also to the hope for that balance of self and world necessary for human growth

"Requa I," Tillie Olsen's final work of fiction, is also an uncompleted work Published before *Yonnondio*, it appeared first as "Requa" in a 1970 issue of the *Iowa Review*, and was subsequently reprinted under the present title in the 1971 volume of *Best American Short Stories*, which collection is also dedicated to Olsen Selma Burkom and Margaret Williams, in "De-Riddling Tillie Olsen's Writings," set off her earliest and her most recent fiction in telling contrast They observe that, covering two and a half years in the lives of the Holbrook family, *Yonnondio* "flies off in many directions," that do not develop proportionately nor ever coalesce, "a Bildungsroman of Mazie's psychosexual growth a polemic for rebellion [and, most successfully,] realistic depiction of the squalid conditions in which the unknown of America's working class miraculously endure" (81) Thus the family, forced to be always on the move, "suffer limitless mental, emotional and physical privation [contrasted with] a bond of brotherhood [, in a] violent, dirty urban landscape 'streets shimmer and are diamond lamps, rayed and haloed' [,and] endurance is changed into affirmation, affirmation lived in acts of love" (81) Olsen's themes are recognizable here early, from the initial detailed and convincing social protest, to the depiction of the family as home and as battlefield, from the mother-daughter failure to thrive, to the commitment within the relationship to education, to beauty, and to faithful endurance in spite of continual undermining by social and personal brutality

At the close of their article, Burkom and Williams quote a description of another victim from "Requa I," that captures that story's contrasts and continuities with her earliest work and highlights the later development in Olsen's style

> *But the known is reaching to him, secretly, reclaiming* Sharp wind breath, fresh from the sea Skies that are all seasons in one day Fog Rain *Known weather of his former life*
>
> Disorder twining with order The discarded, the broken, the torn from the whole weathereaten weatherbeaten, mouldering, or waiting for use-need *Broken existences that yet continue*
>
> Hasps switches screws plugs tubings drills
> Valves pistons shear planes punchers sheaves
> Clamps sprockets coils bits braces dies
>
> How many shapes and sizes, how various, how cunning in application Human mastery, human skill Hard, defined, enduring, they pass through his hands--link to his city life or man made marvel
>
> Wes junking a towed-car, one hundred pieces out of what had been one Singing--unconscious, forceful--to match the motor hum as he machines a new edge, rethreads a pipe Capable, fumbling, exasperated, patient, demanding, easy, uncomprehending, quick, harsh, gentle *concerned* with him *The recognizable human bond*
>
> *The habitable known, stealthily, secretly, reclaiming*
> *The dead things, pulling him into attention, consciousness*
> *The tasks coaxing him wtih trustworthiness, pliancy, doing as he bids*
> having to hold up (252)

This description of a junk yard and its workman as healing for the broken spirit of a young adolescent demonstrates the result of forty years of growth and continuity in Olsen's vision "Requa I" begins, "It seems he had had to hold up his head forever All he wanted was to lie down " In a posture reminiscent of Andy Kvaternick's in *Yonnondio*--"no more can you stand erect You lose that heritage of man, too"--a thirteen-year-old appears as unlikely candidate for

reclamation and recovery, or even for survival. Stevie, the sole support of his invalid mother during her final months of cancer, has been rescued by an unknown uncle (his mother's brother) in whose pick-up he rides north from San Francisco to the small town of Requa across the Klamath River. Through fragments of dialogue and exposition, scattered between uncle, child, and assorted residents of the boarding house, junk shop, and bar where Wes lives and works, the reader learns of Stevie's breakdown, oppressed by the "immanence" of objects and events which he is unable to sort out or express.

Park-Fuller calls this story the most revealing example of how Olsen's consciousness works (349). Immersion in the world vacillates in Stevie's impressions (his inability to stand erect, to hold his head up) with alienation from "the other" (things, people, memories) as he experiences dizziness, weakness, suffocation:

> Everything slid, moved, as if he were still in the truck. He had been holding up his head forever. He was lying on the ground, *the ground*. . . . The trees stretched up and up so you couldn't see if they had tops, and up there they leaned as if they were going to fall. There hadn't even been time to say good-bye to the lamppost that he could hug and swing himself round and round. Round and round like his head, having to hold it up; forever. Being places he had never been. Waiting moving sliding trying. Staying up to take care of his mother, afraid to lie down even when she was quiet, 'cause he might fall asleep and not hear her if she needed him. (237)

The concrete in Olsen's descriptions has moved deeper inward and the social consciousness and moral outrage are more intimately embodied in a seemingly helpless victim.

Stevie's crisis deepens toward catatonic withdrawal as his uncle tries to introduce him to Mrs. Ed and Bo at the boarding house, to Evans at the junk yard where they work. Withdrawing further, the boy remembers, in snatches only, scenes of his mother's death, his own sleeplessness. The description of his survival, the turn toward his reclamation, and the signs of possible recovery are existential and experiential, as Park-Fuller puts it, to the author's consciousness. Mirrored in the relationships with the backwoods personalities and in the objects and tools of discarded trash, sorted, realigned, and restored to usefulness, Stevie's own return to

a "human gait," to existential balance, and to the life-giving inspiration and expiration of normal breathing becomes the story of a broken microcosm restored through hope.

Park-Fuller observes that "past lives can't be changed but the past changes each time consciousness is recovered in the present through the pre-reflective expression of it in immediate circumstances" (373). Thus his mother's image appears as Stevie bends over a pool of water, and his mother's words recur, unbidden, as he tries to cover his uncle after a late-night spree:

> The blanket ends wouldn't lap to cover. He had to pile on his coat, Wes's mackinaw, and two towels, patting them carefully around the sleeping form. *There now you'll be warm,* he said aloud, *sleep sweet, sweet dreams* (though he did not know he had said it, nor in whose inflections.)
>
> . . . His uncle moaned, whispered something; he leaned down to hear it, looked full on the sleeping face. Face of his mother. *His face.* Family face. (259)

As the shock of death, the exhaustion of his previous life, come to "rest" (one translation for the word "Requa") and people and things around him come back into focus, Stevie finds words for experiences that previously overwhelmed him, able to express, and thus incorporate himself within his own life again. Olsen's faith in the life-giving power of experience "brought to the writing" emerges here as concrete reality.

Elaine Neil Orr reads Stevie's recovery also as arising from the encouragement to find a voice, to take part in co-creating a world, to actualize in expression the fact that all people are "gifted." She calls this capacity, that Olsen describes so accurately in concrete images and events, the humanist's definition of the "sacred presence in life." For her, a broken text about discarded and partial objects and lives is clue to the direction that political and spiritual renewal may be taking in our larger context:

> The characters live in near poverty, with the uneasy knowledge that "half the grown men in the country's not working" (249). Wes is an imperfect parent, and Steve's near wellness at the end is tentative. But a community develops among the "family," composed of three races (Native American, Oriental, white). One

> cooks, one works a job, one remembers the dead. Working together, they create a holy, that is, a life-giving community of sojourners.
>
> . . . memories are too many and eventually, in the human reflected image--Wes/his mother--Stevie begins to let the past live. This reconnaissance in the junkyard is a striking and certainly "other" imagining for twentieth-century understandings. Olsen seems to point to the masses of broken and unheeded human lives, not to traditionally sacred texts and symbols and not to the glitter and polish of high technology, as harboring the divine promises of life for the future. If we read the story as disclosing political and spiritual truth, then we must consider the possibility that the historically abused are the source, and not simply the means, of the earth's renewal and hoped-for future. (133)

The quotation chosen originally by Burkom and Williams to typify "Requa"'s theme is Orr's choice here for Olsen's focus and content in this story of restoration from despair.

Finally Blanche H. Gelfant, in *Writing in America: Voices in Collage,* tells of hearing Tillie Olsen read "Requa I" at the 1982 meeting of the College English Association where she participated as a respondent.

> No one has written so eloquently about silences . . . or shown as poignantly that a writer can recover her voice. In . . . "Requa," Tillie Olsen reclaims once more a power of speech that has proved at times extremely difficult to exercise. . . . Complete but unfinished, "Requa I" is a still-to-be-continued story that develops the theme of human continuity in ways which seem almost subversive. Its form is discontinuous, as though to challenge its theme; the text broken visibly into fragments separated from each other by conspicuous blank spaces--gaps the eye must jump over and the mind fill with meaning. However, the story repudiates the meanings that might be inferred from its disintegrated form, and from its imagery and setting, both influenced by literary traditions of the past that Olsen continues only to subvert. "Requa I" evokes the poetry of the twenties in its wasteland motifs, and novels of the thirties in its realistic portrayal of America's Great Depression. Waste and depression are Olsen's subject in "Requa," but

> Olsen's voice, resonant after long silence, is attuned to her vision of recovery--a central vision . . . which . . . enacted in "Requa," produces a work of art. (61)

The lyric and the realistic are seen to combine again to create both aesthetic wonder and active commitment.

Gelfant pursues this theme of unlikely recovery and renewal as she traces what occurs in the town of Requa, named in the language of the local Yorok tribe. By the close of the story a young boy is again able "to hold up," renewed in the midst of a junk yard where found objects are provided new uses, where disorder intertwines with ordering. The predicament of recovery, as depicted here, lies in people, in work, and in retrieval of a past, sorted, and of a voice, of words: recognizing the face of a mother in one's own reflection; recognizing old words of comfort, offered to another, on one's own lips; recognizing the work of salvage through one's own hands before it takes shape in one's body. The story incarnates the process for Gelfant--its broken phrases and displacements enacting the move of incoherence and loss into art, of silence into speech (61-70).

> [With its] design upon the page, Olsen attracts attention to her form which, however, always refers the reader to a social world that "Requa" presents as real, recognizable, and outside the fiction. Still, "Requa" exists as an object: its varied typography creates truncated patterns of print that catch the eye; words placed together as lists or as fragmentary refrains form distinct visual units; blocks of nouns separated from the text produce concrete poems; intervening spaces turn into aesthetic entities. Mimetic of her theme, Olsen's form is enacting the story's crucial phrase: "Broken existences that yet continue." (69)

Thus Gelfant describes the relation between rhetoric, grammar, and the imperative to action in Olsen's prose.

The story closes with two scenes, the first on Memorial Day in the town cemetery, past the "Requiescat in Pace gate," where Stevie waits for Mrs. Ed. They have come from a church service during which truncated thoughts of his Dad, of Mrs. Ed, and of Wes were interspersed with Stevie's momentary notice of cobwebs beneath the backless benches, of his sleeves that won't pull down over the scabs on his arms, and of sentences from the liturgy. The sun is warm

on the graves, and he puts his arm around "a kneeling stone lamb," memorial to "Milena Willet . . . 1 yr. old. . ." (264).

When they return home, Wes wants to know what Mrs. Edler has done with Stevie who's been

> frisky as a puppy. . . . Chased me. . . . Rassled. . . . Paid attention Curled up and fell asleep on the way home.
>
> That's where he is--still sleeping. Lay down second we got home and I can't get him up. Blowing out the biggest bubble of snot you ever saw. Just try and figger that loony kid.
>
> *steathily secretly reclaiming*
>
> (265)

In her most recent story, Olsen has found her objective correlative--for the universal in the local and most colloquial characters and setting, for sociological, economic, and psychological realities in the circumstances of a child, for recovery of brokenness in fragmented, expressive form. And, according to Gelfant's reading, Olsen has made that correlative speak not only to the personal and local, but to global dangers and needs as well. It is also true that, although the roles of the dead mother and Mrs. Ed are crucial in the story, here, for the first time in her fiction, Olsen's major characters are male.

CHAPTER VI

CONTINUING RESEARCH AND CRITICAL WORK

Directions for future research on Tillie Olsen work alluded to in the course of the present study include her influence on women writers of the 1970's and 80's, the effect of earlier traditions upon her fiction, further analysis of political and economic themes in her writing and their reflection of Marxist and Communist movements in this century, and the redefinition of tragedy in post-modern literature, with an expanded description of the new forms of fiction emerging from all these developments.

In 1976, Elaine Showalter wrote in that "'literature has never been so sexually polarized . . . and women, as subject, images, and artists, have never been so inconsequential in the realms of high literary culture [currently dominated by] Pynchon, Barth, Heller, Barthelme, Hawkes, Coover, Vonnegut, Elkin.'" She cited a survey, "Ongoing American Fiction," reported in the spring, 1975, *Triquarterly,* as devoid of female names. Though a few women were then writing in "'the abstract, discontinuous,parodistic manner of postmodernist fiction,'" such authors as Susan Sontag, Rosellen Brown, Rosalyn Dexter, and Carol Emshwiller remained unnoticed. A new "regional" literature had emerged, according to Showalter's analysis, whose "'region is the library'"; "'apocalypse, war, entropy, cybernetics, baseball, computers, and rockets'" were its preoccupations, none of them androgynous. And she referred to this trend as "'the new virtuoso fiction,'" the yardstick of what is serious and important (and, therefore, seriously reviewed and critiqued) in contemporary literature. Meanwhile, women writers were once more being relegated to "that snugly isolated inner space of art which they have often described as 'the living centre,' space which always looks disturbingly like the kitchen" (qtd. in *Silences* 254-55).

Ten years later, Nancy Baker Jones, in her 1986 dissertation titled, *On Solid Ground: The Emergence of the Self-Created Woman in Contemporary American Literature*, began her

study of six contemporary women writers with an appreciative description of Tillie Olsen's work. Jones first defines the "self-created woman" as one who confronts the dominant culture around and within her, that is, her experience of the values inherent in language, law, and tradition and the institutions that currently dominate and shape them. Jones identifies such "experience" as that not only of women, but of members of racial, ethnic, and economic minorities as well, combinations of which women also represent. Caught in the complex interplay of what Olsen terms "circumstances," such women seek through "the creative possibilities in language and storytelling to create themselves on their own terms" (8). Thus, moving away from the status of what Jones calls "ghostliness"--that is, "when present, invisible, when visible, of no substance" (12)--the self-created woman, according to Jones' analysis, asserts the right "to define herself in her own words," to use her energies in her own behalf, to value her efforts and acknowledge her experience, and to "mold herself in the image of her own making . . . as the artist of the self" (12).

Jones' study further visualizes the influence of dominant and of feminist writers as overlapping circles, and she dubs the crescent outside the overlap "the wild zone" in which women alone are seeking their voice, independent of male values. No longer muted, they struggle, in many cases, with the complexity of being American, ethnic, and/or poor, and female, identities that often conflict within the individual, as in her community, their integration requiring a double- and triple-consciousness. The result can be, as Jones terms it, "solid ground," shared across cultures by women who respect ethnic, folk, and traditional uniqueness, but recognize that "one cannot survive while alone, . . . that life must be lived in relation" (36). Finally, Jones sees Olsen's women as beginning this process; for example, in the face of the world's capacity to truncate hope, Anna and Maizie attempt to wrest control of their lives out of the waste and silencing and oppression in which they live. But only Eva is able to persist in the struggle. In her, however, though "the spring is coiled," release comes too late for recovery (45). Jones then examines the writing of five successors to Tillie Olsen, Leslie Marmon Silko (native American poet), Toni Morrison and Alice Walker (black feminists), Maxine Hong Kingston (Chinese-American), and Grace Paley (American-Jewish writer). Her choice of Olsen as reference point for these contemporary writers of poetry and fiction suggests avenues for

further research into both men and women influenced by Olsen's fiction and non-fiction who might also throw light on the future of her prediction--"These Things Shall Be."

Another direction for research, posed by Robert Scholes in his 1974 book, *Structuralism in Literature*, questions whether, like the literary imagination, our political perceptions can move beyond existentialist preoccupation with power and powerlessness to what he terms "structural awareness." Impelled by a growing sensitivity to the limits of our ecological environment, re-education is exposing yet other systems by which we live as beyond our control, but not beyond our power to influence and rearrange. With new-found ability to preserve or destroy on a massive scale, we need, Scholes asserts, "the structuralist imagination," not only to project consequences, but to make us feel them--to become conscious that the orderly, intelligible universe we exist within is not solely of, for, and by us, and that it requires, ultimately, neither human sanction nor human existence for its justification. His view, at the close of his study of structuralism's contribution to current thought, suggests that "men see things, women, relationships," and that, therefore, the creative reunion of male and female in "a politics of structure, and thus of love, is necessary for the "romance" of life on the globe to continue (197-200).

Scholes' literary references for this vision are such works as *The Magus* and *Giles Goatboy*, but Olsen is also a source for tracing, in fictional and non-fictional comment on creativity, the course of cultural consciousness of these issues through the century. Though studies of her political development through the 30's appear in critics like Cunneen and Rosenfelt, literary criticism based on sociological theory has not been applied to her works as a whole.

In another radical critique of the view of power-relations that dominate Western thought, Gelfant calls attention to Olsen's constructive insights into sources of reclamation and recovery in the face of modern culture's counteractions. In her sensitive reading of "Requa I," Gelfant highlights the fact that the broken and despised victims of a world system may offer not only a clue to its self-destructiveness, but, in fact, the source and means for its change and renewal. Tillie Olsen's work offers psychoanalytic and developmental theorists illustrations of the stages of development and of conditioning that can foster creativity beyond survival. In addition,

feminist theorists would find provocative her choice of tropes--metaphor and metonymy, for example--and its implication for control versus open analysis (Culler 243-47).

Further, the preference for metaphor in the literature of the West has been associated, by some feminist critics, with the male progenitor's anxiety over the question of paternity. Since Freudian readings have become crucial to much feminist analysis, whether adopted or rejected, these critics should find Olsen's tropes and their associations within and beyond her work revealing, especially her specific insights about the family, in both her own and the culture's patterns. One provocative question might be whether her choice of figures is consistent with or contradictory to her themes. Richard M. Elman evaluates the significance of rhetorical preferences in Olsen's work:

> . . . [t]he poverty which she describes never strikes one as formulary or anachronistic, but as an image of contemporary experience. Although addicted to metaphorical language, she uses it flexibly and unself-consciously to record, to analyze, and then to judge, fusing it with thought and feeling in such a way that prose becomes the central intelligence of these dramas. (295)

Clearly these issues are examined in the present study as well; the close reading of *Tell Me a Riddle* offered here can contribute to further research into the implications of her preference for particular rhetorical forms.

Perceptive critics have also identified dimensions of tragedy in Olsen's fiction. Richard Elman's *Commonweal* article addresses this issue: "The death of Mrs. Olson's [sic] heroine is the death of social consciousness itself, gruesome, alienated, and without consolation. In the death-struggle of this old activist and her mate (with both continually pitting their dignities against each other) Mrs. Olson has envisaged a true tragedy of human mortality" (296). The question arises whether the dimensions of classical tragedy, the definition of "hero" and the extent of "the fall," are convincingly adapted in her "myths" to modern circumstances of choice and fate.

Mary DeShazer also confirms this association of feminist issues in "Tell Me a Riddle" with the potential for deepening the implications and scope of contemporary literary themes. In her examination of Olsen's "linguistic alchemy," as she calls it, DeShazer parallels Eva's loss of

physical consciousness and simultaneous increase in spiritual insight with her movement from silence to oracular speech. She sees Olsen's depiction of the old woman here as wrestling, like Oedipus, with the circular riddle of the Sphinx: "What creature goes on four feet in the morning, at noon on two, and in the evening upon three?" And DeShazer responds that "man" has too long been both the seeker in this myth and the answer, that it is time for woman to identify the nature of the quest and "find the power to name her own experience" (21). The implication is that story (including tragedy) takes a different form for women who understand the oracular paradox as calling, not for answers, but for renewed focus upon the conditions of the quest itself. For, in fact, the riddle has no answer. The identity of the creature remains shrouded in mystery, answered only in contradictions and, as DeShazer terms them, "paired opposites" (present-past, motion-stillness, speech-silence, others-self, life-death) (21). This critic offers another "structuralism and beyond" scenario for research, and, perhaps, for a redefinition of "tragedy," of the "hero," and of the dimensions of "flaw" and of "loss" in feminist experience.

In her testimony to the profound issues in Olsen's prose, Elizabeth Fisher comments in the *Nation* on the 1972 reprint of *Tell Me a Riddle*: "[I]n its 116 pages are contained several lives and lifetimes, as if all the writing Tillie Olsen didn't do has coalesced in intensity and packed itself into the stories" (472). The depth, dimensions, and significance of Olsen's concentrated and poetic prose suggest that the sacrifice of human potential and its subsequent loss to the human community, as represented in her mimesis, might identify in her work the classical proportions required of a claim to modern tragedy. Since, today, we have had Shakespeare's hermeneutic confirmed in a fresh way by linguistics and phenomenology--that we are "such things as dreams are made of"--it is appropriate that a reassessment of the nature of the tragic in terms of modern life and loss be continually reexamined.

Finally, Carolyn and Ernest Rhodes, in their *Dictionary of Literary Biography 1980 Yearbook* article, state that Tillie Olsen's 1975 Award from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters was given for, among other distinctions, work "very nearly constituting a new form of fiction." Genre critics might look closely at the short-story form, at collections of related, but individually discrete stories, at the discontinuous, fractured novel, and at the variety of forms of the chronicle, the epistolary biography, and the memoir to decide whether Olsen's

Tell Me a Riddle may represent renewal beyond "the novel." In a period when attempts "to explain the whole" of an era or an ethos, or even of a limited cultural "moment," are considered presumptuous by deconstructionists and traditional critics alike, the apparently modest scope of Olsen's stories, and the indirection of their connecting threads, may signal further changes at work in current literary form. Olsen's work may eventually be seen as a major contribution to the adaptation fiction is making to the depredations and opportunities offered by "the linguistic turn" and its implications.

CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

When, in the late 60's, I first read Tillie Olsen's *Tell Me a Riddle*, I was surprised (grasped and overtaken) by the language, first of all, and impelled by it to ask "How does she do it?" (a structuralist question about narrative logic) and "What is it she does?" (a hermeneutical question about the nature of meaning). I have pursued these two issues, with the help of other interpreters, and uncovered in my own readings of all these sources a certain "radiance," but experienced no resulting induction into the mysteries.

Frank Kermode, in his Charles Eliot Norton lectures, Harvard University, 1977-78, examines a series of texts to address the question of *The Genesis of Secrecy,* focusing especially on the New Testament parables, the Gospel of Mark, James Joyce' *Ulysses*, and Franz Kafka's parable in *The Trial*, "Before the Law." From Kafka he takes the image of a petitioner who sits at the door of the Law, said to be open to all, but is barred by a succession of doorkeepers with whom he continually debates. After years of waiting, and as a very old man, the suppliant observes briefly "an immortal radiance streaming from the door." Dying, he asks the doorkeeper why, in all the years past, only he has come to ask admittance. The story concludes: "The answer is, "this door was intended only for you. Now I am going to shut it." The outsider, though someone had "intended" to let him in, or anyway provided a door for him, remained outside" (27-28). As I complete the study of *Tell Me a Riddle*, I have new sympathy for that seeker, not because I have exercised his persistence or faithfulness, nor approached Kermode's range of sources and insights, but because the mysteries, finally glimpsed, have left all of us, confirmed as outsiders.

The other figure Kermode offers the would-be interpreter, seeking closure, is that of the fortuities and contradictions in literary works, the rejected or dismissed contingencies of narrative that appear inadvertently as something important is going on, but that may, in fact, be clues to the conundrums of plot, character, and theme. He refers, for illustration, first to Joyce's "man in the mackintosh," mysteriously present at a series of events in the novel, and, second, to a figure in the Gospel of Mark who flees from Gesthemene as Jesus is captured and led away to his trial. From the work of the critics, Kermode speculates that the brown "mackintosh," in his several appearances, may be only a red herring; a stand-in for Joyce's brother, Stanislaus; Joyce himself, in cameo, or a character from one of his own short stories; or, perhaps, a signal that incidentals carry a key that the central focus of a fiction, or a life, does not. As to the fleeing figure in the garden, examining significant terms in the original Greek--a "young man" who wears an expensive "linen garment" which he sheds as he escapes detention by the guards--Kermode finds them recurring in a later episode: inside the tomb on Easter morning the women encounter a "young man" (the angel) who informs them Jesus is gone, and a "linen garment," empty and folded, the discarded grave clothes of the disappeared body. What Kermode, in the traditions of New Testament scholarship, or of Kafkan interpretation, makes of these repetitions is less important here than his skillful application of the familiar deconstructionist criticism that events within a work signal how it is to be read, and that those clues may be lodged, in particular, in apparently incidental, or even contradictory, elements of the fiction.

Kermode chooses as classical metaphor for this insight and conviction the god Hermes, "patron of thieves, merchants,travelers; of heralds and what heralds pronounce, their "kerygma" or message (1). He relates how "the trivial or irrelevant" in Hermes' pronouncements often becomes revelation after long delay, and that this "secret sense" is carried by a "cunning, and occasionally violent . . . trickster, a robber"-god who is, not surprisingly, also "the patron of interpreters" (1). Thus, Kermode observes, the art of hermeneutics (that derived from the occupation of a classical shape-changer, reliable primarily for his unreliability) also involves cunning, and "the professional exercise of stealth and violence" (2).

> This word itself, after centuries of innocent use, turns out to have secret senses; for it is now thought by some to connote the most serious philosophical inquiry. . . . Even in its more restricted application, which is related to the interpretation of texts, the word covers a considerable range of activity, from the plain proclamation of sense to the oracular intimations of which the true understanding may be delayed for generations. (1)

For Hermes is also "the god of going-between . . . between the dead and the living . . . between the latent and the manifest" (2). It is within this tradition that Olsen's slim volume has led to hermeneutical issues--"What is it she does?"--about methodological principles of interpretation; to structuralist theories--"How does she do it?"--concerning narrative logic; and to divinatory reliance on the "third ear," or Ricoeur's "surplus of meaning."

Borrowing from Derrida, Jonathan Culler in his work, *On Deconstruction*, recommends as response to this experience "'an analysis which is patient, open, aporetical, in constant transformation, often more fruitful in the acknowledgment of its impasses than in its positions'" (*Marques* 383 qtd. in Culler 216). More important for deconstruction theorists is an awareness that "the writer writes *in* a language and *in* a logic whose own system, of laws, and life his discourse by definition cannot dominate absolutely" and that, in fact, governs him. Therefore,

> "reading must always aim at a certain relationship, unperceived by the writer, between what he commands and what he does not command in the patterns of language that he uses . . . not a certain quantitative distribution of light and darkness, of weakness and force, but a signifying structure that critical reading must *produce*." (*De la grammatologie* 226-27/157-58 qtd. in Culler 217- 18).

Thus intention, or any "explicit line of argumentation" within the text is "always exceeded by the text," in "its subversive other" (Culler 218). I assume that whatever application of this approach to criticism I have succeeded in applying to Olsen's writing is also applicable to my own.

That this excess of textuality--in unacknowledged clues to "reading" within the work and in intertextual insights from outside--also relates to Ricoeur's "surplus of meaning" theory

contributes to the continuing surprise awaiting the interpreter's ear and eye. My own effort has been to add to the ongoing investigation of Olsen's art by detailing what I brought to the reading of *Tell Me a Riddle*, that is, special interest in language patterns, rhythms, and figures and what they induce in the reader's consciousness, both in pre-reflective orientation and in structural logic, which not only enriches interpretation, but also calls any specific reading into further question. It is difficult to invade Olsen's "seamless" prose in order to do such an analysis; except for the DeShazer study, this kind of examination has been limited.

Kermode offers special comment on this challenge. He focuses, in particular, on the interpretation of parables, defining the term in Greek as "comparison," but in its use in the Greek Bible as "riddle" or "dark saying" (23). He continues by observing that "'narrativity' always entails a measure of opacity" (25). In fact, he finds that "parables are about everybody's incapacity to penetrate their sense," that being an insider to their meaning may be "only a more elaborate way of being kept outside," and that "interpretation, though a proper and interesting activity, is bound to fail; [for] it is an intrusion always, and always unsuccessful" (25). Though acknowledging, then, that the effort at interpretation is "proper," he sets about challenging Western culture's literary preference for well-made narrative that effects closure in efforts to achieve unity, coherence, and "claritas."

Kermode, in fact, goes farther by examining the function of secrecy in the institutional arrangements that cultivate it, and in the role of inside/outside and fortuities/closure in defining limits and assigning control within these cultural arrangements. For him the allegorizing of reading in order to explain texts that have been deemed significant to a community's identity has been a means to try to answer, and thus "control," the unsettled and unsettling riddles of human existence as reflected in works of art. Examining the history of interpretation of the Gospel of Mark, in particular, he shows the variety of readings codified in successive historical contexts, not infinite, but often contradictory. On the basis of this insight, he faces the hard saying of Jesus about the use of parables (riddles) within the Gospels: "so that seeing [the outsiders] may see and not perceive, and hearing they may hear but not understand, lest at any time they should

turn, and their sins be forgiven them" (Mark 4: 11-12). The disciples' reactions following this verse suggest that even they may be outsiders.

Kafka's story of the man who seeks access to the Law and Mark's account of the "young man," fleeing and disappearing, and of another, resurrected and returning, become for Kermode clues to the difficulties and potentialities of all interpretation. He analyzes a series of functions involved in the presentation and reception of art--such contradictory concepts as the frame (whether inside or outside a work), the role of the guardians of the mysteries (Kafka's doorkeeper and the gospel writers), the womb or center of creativity as "outside" folded in, and the border-inhabiting messengers (Hermes as god of thieves, of travellers, of tricksters, of commerce, of healers, and of storytellers)--all considered as figures significant for the situation of interpretation. Like Jonathan Culler, Kermode observes that we are finite and thus should not to be surprised by our confusions --or, in the image of his framing parables, Kafka and Mark as guardians, the man come to wait upon the law, the disciples listening to the "kerygma," all remain outside, waiting, in a variety of contexts, for illumination, but watching and listening from darkness. And he says of himself as commentator, "[M]y task is not so much to offer interpretations as to speak of their modes, their possibilities, and their disappointments" (133).

Kermode states further that the gospel, on which he is attempting interpretation, is a work dividing and joining the promises and the fulfillments, "an insertion, at the most crucial point of impression, into the world narrative" (134). Here are described the efforts and disappointments of Tillie Olsen's characters as well: of the mother who enters the on-going complications of a life narrative unable to organize its meaning; of an old sailor's truncated story as he succumbs to defeat amid echoes of his life's affirmations; of a mother caught up in silence, heavy with contexting explanations left unspoken; and of Eva who returns to the scene of "promise" as she dies. According to Kermode, all Mark's intercalations image a greater intervention represented by the whole book. And all lesser interventions deepen and complicate the sense of the narrative; or, they indicate that more story is needed, as supplement, if the story is to make sense" (134). Enter the eager, and beleaguered, interpreter. After citing many

examples from the convoluted text on which he is working, Kermode concludes that "there is, in the superimposition [of opposites], something to interpret" and that "mystery is [often] confronted with stupid silence" (142-43).

In another qualification, he cautions against resorting to formulaic irony, or the idea of reading in a sense opposite to what is stated--not to limit possible senses of a work. The problem he wants to clarify is that "[w]e are most unwilling to accept mystery, what cannot be reduced to other and more intelligible forms. Yet that is what we find here: something irreducible, therefore perpetually to be interpreted; not secrets to be found out one by one, but Secrecy" (143).

In response, Kermode challenges the idea that we may simply project our own bewilderment upon the text, and asserts that the more ancient and long-standing view of sacred texts is that "[t]he belief that a text might be an open proclamation, available to all, coexisted comfortably with the belief that it was a repository of secrets" (144). Like Freud's awareness that he shared his hypothesis of latent sense in dreams with centuries of folk interpreters, this view of sacred books, Kermode understands, extends to what he calls "the secular canon," as well. Thus, he asserts that riddles are an element in all narrative "suitably attended to":

> Outsiders see but do not perceive. Insiders read and perceive, but always in a different sense. We glimpse the secrecy through the meshes of the text . . . visible from our angle. . . . a momentary radiance, delusive or not, as in Kafka's parable. When we come to relate that part to the whole, . . . we see why Hermes is the patron of so many other trades besides interpretation. There has to be trickery. And we interpret always as transients . . . both in the book and in the world which resembles the book. For the world is our beloved codex. . . . [which], living as reading, [we] like to think of . . . as a place where we can travel back and forth at will, divining congruences, conjunctions, opposites; extracting secrets from its secrecy. . . . This is the way we satisfy ourselves with explanations of the unfollowable world--as if it were a structured narrative, of

> which more might always be said by trained readers of it, by insiders. World and book, it may be, are hopelessly plural, endlessly disappointing; . . . narratives [perhaps] only because of our impudent intervention, and susceptible of interpretation only by our hermetic tricks. Hot for secrets, our only conversation may be with guardians who know less and see less than we can; and our sole hope and pleasure is in the perception of a momentary radiance, before the door of disappointment is finally shut on us. (144-45)

Theorists like Ricoeur intend to return the book to relevance for the world; and writers like Tillie Olsen call for a widening context, a new angle, from which to view the mystery. Agreeing with Showalter that the exclusiveness of the literary canon is more persistent than imagined, Olsen sets herself the task--her "Gesthemene," in Thomas Mann's reference--to help open interpretation to include the excluded--the poor, the female, the ignored or disregarded. Students of fortuity, of folds and borders, of cunning and grace, recognize and acknowledge the wisdom of such a strategy for the literary enterprise.[77]

Like Kermode and Culler, Hirsch and Ricoeur, Olsen is a hermeneut, interested in the methodological principles of interpretation and explanation. But she is also a creator of metaphorical chains and a herald of the mysteries in symbols that summon for readers a surplus of meaning to expand their social and artistic imaginations. Her "turning as the other turned" of the old couples' nightly touch reflects also Helen's "[s]heltering [of] her daughter close, mourning the illusion of the embrace" and Allie's arms around Whitey's neck "destroying, dissolving him utterly, the helpless warmth against him, this feel of the child--lost country to him and unattainable." But her images refer not only to the unattainable within her text, but connect also with the unresolvable in personal and cultural experience beyond it. Like Kermode's "parable," "riddling," or "dark saying," her old woman's last plea--"have I ten hands?"--is the universal mother-quandary, and "the day that hands will find a way to speak" extends beyond Jim Holbrook's lost hope. In a sculpture unveiled recently as a memorial to the Holocaust,[78] a forearm, raised with an open hand and covered all around with smaller hands and arms reaching

up its length stands as the artist's conception, both literal and mysterious, of one consequence of the neglect that Eva mourned--insufficient care and unheeded powerlessness--as it speaks for the now silent and forgotten hysteria of the gas chambers.

Using another of her repeated figures, Olsen, in her last-published writing (an essay for her edition, *Mother to Daughter/Daughter to Mother*)[79] describes a dream reported to her by her mother to whose bedside she had come during the old woman's final illness. In this, her most recent biographical comment on the sources for "Riddle," she writes: "My mother--so much of whose waking life had been a nightmare, that common everyday nightmare of hardship, limitation, longing, of baffling struggle to raise six children in a world hostile to human unfolding--my mother, dying of cancer, had beautiful dream visions--in color" (261). One of these (Olsen says, her mother could not have known) came on Christmas Eve, induced perhaps by her sense of the approach of the solstice. Though, "[a]s a girl in long ago Russia, she had sternly broken with all observances of organized religion, associating it with pogroms and wars," still it was the "time of the shortest light, the longest dark, the cruelest cold, when--as she had explained to us as children--poorly sheltered ancient peoples in northern climes had summoned their resources to make out of song, light, food, expressions of love--festivals of courage, hope, warmth, belief" (261-62).

In her dream the metaphorical knock came on her door and she answered, suspecting the identity of the visitors from the neighing of the camels. (Olsen interjects she did not correct her mother about camel sounds.) Against the lights of a city "holy to three faiths," the wise men stood on her threshhold, in jeweled robes. She observed they were lost--"'Else, why do you come to me?'"--but they insisted they had sought her out "to talk of whys, of wisdom." She welcomed them, "'starved for such talk'"--and it was then she saw they were not men, but women,

> *in coarse everyday shifts and shawls of the old country . . . feet wrapped round and round with rags for lack of boots. . . .*

> *That their speech was not highflown, but homilies; their bodies not lordly in bearing, magnificent, but stunted, misshapen--used all their lives as a beast of burden used.* (262)

One among them began to sing, and all joined in, including her mother, "through cracked lips, singing too--a lullaby": "For in the shining cloud of their breaths, a baby lay, breathing the universal sounds every human baby makes, sounds out of which are made all the separate languages of the world (263). Cradling the child, one by one, the women "sheltered the baby," and, Olsen's mother ended:

> ". . . the hope for the world, the baby, holy with possibility, that is all of us at birth." And she began to cry, out of the dream and its telling now.
>
> "Still I can feel the baby in my arms, the human baby, before we are misshapen; crucified into a sex, a color, a walk of life, a nationality . . . and the world yet warrings and winter." (263)

In the words of mothers and daughters, the old woman's dream comes as echo of another old woman's words.

Olsen ends her report with the comment that she had seen her mother only three times in her adult life, separated by a continent and by the demands of family and poor means. Her mother had little knowledge of written English and was, when Olsen saw her, finally, "in the last days she had language at all" (263). When she died, she left no worldly possessions, but "an inexhaustible legacy . . .

> this vision of universality, before the lessenings, harms, divisions of the world are visited upon it.
>
> She sheltered and carried that belief, that wisdom--as she sheltered and carried us, and others--throughout a lifetime lived in a world whose season was, as still it is, time of winter. (263-64)

That her mother could sing, and that, as her daughter, Tillie Olsen could hear her, comes close, for me, to a gathering up of the fortuities and contradictions, from within and without, for the

advent of mystery almost entered. I believe that, in her, art becomes "shield against the monstrous shapes of loss, of betrayal, of death," a "funny word . . . invented by her to say: *comfort*"; a home, not "sorted," where "the many rhythms rock apart and are yet one glad rhythm." But, being Tillie Olsen, she always hears in order "to teach" and speaks in order "to understand." However intermittent and fleeting, in repetition and refrain, through catalogues and hesitations, in contrasts that become contradictions, her metaphors and symbols come round again, with, not only poetic promise, but stern injunction--to tell the riddle to the children and "to carry the world" by gathering useful "hands enough."

NOTES

[1]Stephen Dedalus, in *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, vows: "I will not serve that in which I no longer believe, whether it calls itself my home, my fatherland or my church."

[2]See notes 6 and 53 for historical context.

[3]According to Deborah Rosenfelt's article, "From the Thirties: Tillie Olsen and the Radical Tradition," Olsen taught a class at the Young Communist League's Haight Street headquarters, San Francisco, on Marxist and suffragette sources of the women's movement, and served as President of the CIO Auxiliary of California, organizing their WWII relief effort. Thus her feminist/humanist analysis was informed by leftist politics; she herself attests, in a 1933 journal entry, Faribault, Minnesota, to another commitment: "I don't know what it is in me, but I must write too" (380-94).

[4]Irving Howe, in *World of Our Fathers*, identifies Isaac Loeb Peretz with the mid-nineteenth-century "Haskala, or Enlightenment, that brought modern thought to the middle-class segment of the Jewish population" of Eastern Europe as it moved from the isolation of the "stetl," and its Hasidic pietism, toward a new social awareness and a spirit of "revolt and self-education" (15). Contributor to "the blossoming of a secular Yiddish literature," Peretz opened his Warsaw home to young Jewish writers and "rediscovered and refined the Jewish tradition so that on its own it could enter the era of intellectual modernism . . . in both Eastern Europe and . . . the United States" (19-20). Known for his elegaic style, linear story line, winding rhythms, and anti-heroic protagonists, he perfected the wisdom story which younger writers both modeled upon and reacted against, among them Sholom Aleichem. Tillie Olsen refers to Irving Howe as interpreter of her cultural background and as reference for he influence of this, her favorite Yiddish writer. Through Peretz, Howe writes, "the values of nineteenth-century Europe would find a home in Yiddish, and Yiddish voices . . . would find a home in the world" (643).

[5]Mary K. DeShazer, in her article "'In the Wind of Singing': The Language of 'Tell Me a Riddle,'" notes that the old man names his wife only in ridicule, anger, or, later, in gentle chiding, using epithets introduced always with "Mrs." These "sometimes humorous, often derogatory appellations . . . [suggest his] difficulty in perceiving Eva apart from her roles . . . [and] provide an ironic portrait of his marital struggle." The old woman resorts to epithets less, choosing to hurl accusations directly (26-27). The name-calling exposes the consequences of their quarrel, and the intimacy of its perverse form of self-discovery.

[6]Howe writes that between the assassination of Alexander II (1881) and the outbreak of WWI, approximately one-third of East European Jews left their homeland--from fear of pogroms and to seek new soil in which to establish Jewish culture, ease their personal lives, and realize their ambitions (26). The first wave of immigrants arrived in America in the 1880's; and, after the collapse of the 1905 Russian Revolution (see note 53), the second wave included a large number of Bundists, or Jewish socialists. Disciplined by revolutionary sacrifice, some who became leaders in the American-Jewish socialist movement testified that terms served in czarist jails had conditioned them for such roles because of discussions there concerning party programs and platforms: the role of the peasants, the mission of the working classes, the structures most appropriate for a post-revolutionary government. Shifting loyalties from "stetl" to international labor movement, many Jewish immigrants transferred their devotion from orthodox ritual and patient suffering in expectation of the Messiah to left-wing politics, trade-union organizing, and a modern, secularist Jewish culture. However, some emigrés among them found their hopes disappointed by the individualistic competitiveness of American socialism and yearned for the revolutionary bonds of the more communal alternative in the old country (292). The old woman in "Tell Me a Riddle" is visited with such memories, characterized by her longing for earlier loyalties and commitments, initially to an enlightened, Tolstoyan individualism, and then to a socialist communal order.

[7]In her interview, Tillie Olsen claimed that religious observances, with their candles, songs, and dances, were often the only hope or solace for the Eastern European Jew in the midst of severe poverty and persecution, and that it was also true such celebrations were the occasion for

local bureaucracies to stage pogroms, for it was then that the gathered communities were most vulnerable to attack.

[8]Stephen, in his disquisition on aesthetics (*Portrait*, Chapter V), quotes Aquinas and then, at once flaunting and mocking his Jesuit training, elaborates upon the Latin: "the esthetic image is first luminously apprehended as self-bounded and self-contained upon the immeasurable background of space or time which is not it . . . as *one* thing . . . one whole. That is *integritas*" (165)--equivalent in Olsen to "meaning," unity. Stephen goes on: ". . . from point to point, led by its formal lines . . . balanced part against part within its limits . . . the synthesis of immediate perception is followed by the analysis of apprehension. . . .That is *consonantia*" (165-66--for Olsen, "coherence"). And, finally, not *claritas* as "the artistic discovery . . . of the divine purpose . . . the esthetic image a universal one . . . [but] the only synthesis which is logically and esthetically permissible," and Stephen lays claim to a "radiance of which [Aquinas] speaks in the scholastic *quidditas*, the *whatness* of a thing"--or "the enchantment of the heart" (166). Olsen, would recognize his concluding, de-sacralized definition of what she terms "transport," for she believes that meaning, coherence, and radiance all develop on a purely human scale.

[9]The old woman's hyper-sensitivity to sound is congruent with the reliance of the literary and hortatory upon words, but also with findings of medical science about hearing as the last of the five senses to fail in the dying.

[10]John Foxe, sixteenth-century Oxford scholar and adherent of the Reformation, wrote the Book of Martyrs as a condemned heretic. Protected first by sympathetic noblemen, he eventually escaped to Basil, returning to England only at the accession of Elizabeth, where he set about "revising and enlarging on his admirable Martyrology." Confirming the Queen in "her intention to no longer keep up the cruel practice of putting to death those of opposing religious conviction," Foxe's book (four editions of which were printed before his death) was chained to the lectum in every English cathedral, along with the Bible, "for the access of the people" (xiii-xiv). Documentation of the lives of martyred Christians, it describes their sacrifce, from the stoning of St. Stephen onward, in the name of spiritual freedom and in defiance of limits to religious thought and conscience These riveting accounts of the deaths of the martyrs--by fire, by torture, and at the mercy of wild animals--and of the rulers and tribunals who condemned

them offer sobering witness to the foundations of liberty, and, often, unwitting insights about sources of contemporary religious, historical, and political thought. Until the early twentieth century, it was not uncommon for the Book of Martyrs to hold a prominent place in libraries of American and British families.

The image of this mother and her children reading a martyrology around a lighted table offers intimations of their historical context and their possibly ominous future.

[11]This confusion of Spartacus, martyred leader of the great slave rebellion in Rome in 71 B.C., with Socrates, the Athenian dialectician, teacher, and martyr for truth (*ca* 399 B.C.), signals ambivalence over the works of hands and of art, as it also suggests Olsen's own commitments--to action, inquiry, and expression. Spartacus became a symbol in European socialist movements for championing enslaved peoples; and Olsen, in her interview with me, recalled memorizing an apocryphal speech, attributed to him. The edition of the Book of Martyrs which I consulted pictured neither Spartacus nor Socrates, and I was unable to find in the literature any reference to the fabled speech.

[12]The three conditions for rock formation--annealing to molten fire (igneous), layering and consolidating under pressure (sedimentary), and melding within extreme pressure and heat (metamorphic)--over millenia of time, suggest the inclusiveness in an expanded artistic context, and the dynamic creativity in art and life, as in inanimate nature.

[13]In her interviews and commentary, Tillie Olsen strenuously objects to the concept of the "self-created" person, insisting that it is, instead, life's circumstances that in large measure define the individual.

[14]The dictionary defines "fluting" as "a groove of curved section; as in classical columns and pilasters" and the scalloped and rippled surfaces of rock formations. Her descriptive phrase combines Olsen's references to nature and to art in alliteration that suggests the inaccessible as it also anticipates her scalloping, looping, coils, and turns, and, ultimately, "flutes that tremble in the air."

[15]Among the Russian peasantry, and in folklore, the old woman, or "babushka" ("grandmother"), is the traditional authority "in matters of childbed, the management of infants [the "nyanya"], and lastly in laying out of the dead . . ." (Gorer and Rickman 45). Olsen's old

woman rebels against the repressive superstitions associated with such a role, and against the mother's traditional sacrifice in support of the rabbi and of what she considers exploitative religious rites.

[16]In Olsen's writing, allusions to music typically include references from domestic life (love songs, lullabys, and rhyming verses of children's games), from the classical repertoire of symphony and opera, and from communal drinking songs, dirges, and the music of prison and work gangs.

Schooled in the classical tradition, Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827) anticipated romanticism's form and intensity in passionate musical expressions of individual freedom in the new spirit of humanism. A unique act of the human will, his struggle to compose against encroaching deafness illustrates Olsen's view of understanding--that the handicapped may be the best teachers, and the deaf, those who hear most fully (Budden).

Gaetano Donizetti (1797-1848), also bridging the gap between classical and romantic expression, is credited with bringing dramatic weight to nineteenth-century opera. His "Lucia de Lammermoor" adapts a Sir Walter Scott novel to the stage, depicting the plight of Lucia, daughter of a Scottish laird, who is forced to marry her unscrupulous brother's blackmailer instead of her choice, son of a rival family. In the famous Mad Scene, despair turns to derangement as Lucia sings the familiar coloratura aria, "Il Doluce Suono," which reenacts events that separated her forever from her beloved (Rous 210-15). Olsen's allusions to early romantic works reflect her commitment to expression as central to human development, but in a mode that ironically validates her ambivalence toward celebration of beauty out of suffering.

[17]Marc Chagall (1887-1985), born in the small Russian city of Vitebsk near the Polish border, derived his early twentieth-century style from acquaintance with "stetl" life and the influence of the Hasidim, mystical sectarians whose pietism modified Judaism's earlier orthodox rationalism. His paintings depict dream-like, folklorist figures afloat within the canvas (like the old woman's memory of childhood) as if in whimsical revery over a Russian fairy tale or a Yiddish joke. He is said to have observed: "Our whole inner world is reality--perhaps even more real than the apparent world." Versatile in his media, he produced stage sets for Sholem Aleichem plays, Mozart's opera, "The Magic Flute," and Ravel's ballet, "Daphnis and Chloe"

(McMullen). Since eliding images from music and story was familiar in his imaginative adapting of metaphors among the arts, it is curious what Chagall might have created as illustrator for Olsen's writing. His later work in response to the Holocaust would also recommend him as interpreter of Olsen's spirit.

[18]Honore de Balzac (1799-1850), self-styled "Napoleon of the literary," is credited with "the power of creating a world" because of his acute observation as realist and his intuitive sensitivity as visionary. Encompassed within his panoramic "La Comedie humaine" are philosophical, historical, social, and psychological insights into French life, from the Revolution to the end of Louis-Philippe's reign (Turnell). He is credited with establishing the classical novel through his "gift for setting a scene with living figures, acting from plausible motives" (*Oxford Companion to French Literature*). Because he emphasized both "circumstance" and "spirit" in his characterizations (Hunt), it is fitting that the old woman invoke Balzac to depict an horrific scene.

By contrast, Anton Chekhov (1860-1904), dramatist and short-story writer, built "on the trifles and bits of life, . . . [h]aving reduced external action to a minimum, . . . in order to express the unending tragedy of everyday existence with its tedium, its futility and the inner isolation of man"(Lavrin). Trained as a medical doctor, he focused, with analytical precision, on the decline of the land-owning class in Imperial Russia, his apparent detachment and reticence gauged to reveal the unexpressed frustrations and ruling motives beneath the surface of a declining culture (in *Three Sisters* and *Cherry Orchard*). Chekhov rejected Tolstoyan moral absolutes as response to the repressive political life of his day, choosing instead what he identified as "comedy" for his genre, but in a mood of apparent guileless poignancy familiar also in Olsen's work. His tentative questioning, combined with acute emotional intensity, helped establish the critical values in literature that ultimately recommend Olsen's voice and point of view (Hingley). Their revelation of circumstance as basis for character confirms the old woman's reference to these compassionate realists, reminders also of Tillie Olsen's roots in European soil.

[19]In ambivalent response to her phrase, "the living must comfort themselves," the old woman is intent upon interpretations of death, and of ceremonial burial practices: Jewish, Mexican, Christian, Samoan, ancient Egyptian.

[20]Count Lev Nikolaevich Tolstoy (1828-1910), one of the world's greatest writers, moral thinkers, and mystics, left in mid-life his literary and domestic roles, devoting himself to an ascetic commitment to love as counter to the repression and materialism of nineteenth-century Russia. Husband, father of thirteen children, and author of the two great novels, *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*, he suffered deep ambivalence over riches that made a mockery of his faith and, in a spiritual crisis, chose instead the piety of a Russian peasant. Adopting poverty, humility, and pacifism--termed "Christian anarchism"--he opposed the exploitation of the poor by both state and church. Puritanic Tolstoyanism grew, in part, from his preoccupation with the meaninglessness of death as negation of life, and was his attempt to overcome fear through ultimate meaning that could justify existence (Lavrin). While he remained an individualist in his practice of ascetic chastity and charity, groups founded in response to his later writings practiced both communalism and compassionate outreach in an attempt to live redemptively. Committed to overcoming violence through the moral perfection of a life of love, Tolstoyans typically worked toward a classless and stateless society, free of Marxism's economic determinism and class struggle (Simmons). The old woman experiences the ambiguity of these conflicting views of history, also evidenced in Olsen's personal biography.

Sources of the old woman's cultural references surface in this identification with a dedicated Tolstoyan teacher.

[21]The Book of the Dead is a translation of hymns and religious texts, "compositions which the Egyptians inscribed upon the walls of tombs and sarcophagi, coffins and funeral stelae, papyri and amulets, etc., in order to ensure the well-being of their dead in the world beyond the grave" (Preface v). Copied by scribes between B.C. 1600 and B.C. 900, the inscriptions date from an Egyptian dynasty of B.C. 3500 and from earlier northeast African cultures. The pious Egyptian lived with this book "as the all-powerful guide along the road which, passing through death and the grave, led into the realms of light and life, and into the presence of the divine being Osiris, the conqueror of death, who made men and women to be born again" (x). Known as "The Theban Recension of the Book of the Dead" because its papyri and documentary sources were chiefly found at Thebes, it features significantly the self-created god Thoth, identified by Budge as "divine intelligence [on whose words rest] the formation of the world . . . lord of

earth, air, sea, and sky; . . . scribe of the gods, and inventor of all arts and sciences." Because hermetic books were ascribed to him as god of wisdom, he was translated as "Hermes Trismegistus" ("thrice-great,"), and identified with the Greek messenger god, Hermes (see pp. 189-90). Thoth, as scribe of the gods, also presides at the judgment: Anubis weighs the heart of the deceased against a feather, while Thoth "note[s] on his writing palette with a long reed pen the result of the weighing" (lxxxvii). The versatility of this Egyptian diety mirrors the shape-changing omnipresence of Hermes as well. Theban, Thoth, Thuban--such namings also arise as a preoccupation in Judaism.

[22]See p. 111 for Olsen's explanation of the source of this imagery as her mother-in-law's chicken farm.

[23]The human beings-become-animal in "Tell Me a Riddle"--villagers like chickens who dance, scratching; the sick woman light like a bird, clawed and beaked, like a snake, slithered and hissed--associate literal images of the deprived, half-starved inhabitants of Olshana with the emaciated, delirious victim of cancer. But they also suggest the shape-changing interpreter who sees and hears across boundaries, carrying messages in dark tales and riddles which convey more than surface meanings, and smuggling more-than-obvious implications, in what Ricoeur terms "surplus of meaning." In her interview, Olsen pointed out that "we know now the human body is meant to grow tall; but in the small, knock-kneed, bow-legged bodies of the poor immigrants to this country were written the circumstances of their birth and the deprivation of their nurture." She knew how to evoke the curious eloquence of that stature.

[24]Olsen commented on the effect of AIDS and of cancer on the body: "The whole process that takes place in the coffin takes place now over months and months--alive" (Interview). Being present at her mother's death is a source for the intimacy of her account here. (See Chapter VII.)

[25]The number apparently refers to the death toll at Hiroshima and/or Nagasaki on August 6 and 9, 1945: 130,000 and 75,000 respectively (The *New Columbia Encyclopedia*).

[26]The old man attributes these phrases to Victor Hugo (1802-85), champion of Romantic humanitarianism's ideals. In novels (such as *Les Miserables* and *Notre Dame de Paris*), poetry, and verse drama, he "displayed a geniune freedom in the interpretation of nature, a freedom due to the poet's greater powers of observation and imaginative expression" (Gaudon). Son of a

general in Napoleon's army and a royalist Parisienne mother, Hugo first supported the monarchy, then republicanism, championing the Revolution's call for "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity." He served during the Republic as "representative of the people," then went into exile for many years as opponent of Louis Napoleon (Barrere). Through both his poetry and fiction, he is recognized as a seer whose "visionary world intrudes significantly upon passages of realistic narrative" (Gaudon). In her interview, Olsen identified Upton Sinclair's book, *The Cry for Justice: An Anthology of the Literature of Social Protest*, as an early influence in her life (see note 56). The Preface to *Les Miserables* is quoted in that work: ". . . so long as the three problems of the age--the degradation of man by poverty, the ruin of women by starvation, and the dwarfing of children by physical and spiritual night--are not solved; . . . so long as ignorance and misery remain on earth, books like this cannot be useless" (182). Roots of the old woman's concern for justice, as of Olsen's encouragement of the voiceless, are documented here.

[27]The source of these lines is a hymn, verses by John Addington Symonds (1840-93) and music--T. Williams' 1789 "Psalmodia Evangelica":

These things shall be: a loftier race
Than e'er the world hath known shall rise
With flame of freedom in their souls
And light of knowledge in their eyes

They shall be gentle, brave, and strong,
To spill no drop of blood, but dare
All that may plant man's lordship firm
On earth, and fire, and sea, and air

Nation with nation, land with land,
Inarmed shall live as comrades free;
In every heart and brain shall throb
The pulse of one fraternity

New arts shall bloom of loftier mold,
And mightier music thrill the skies,
And every life shall be a song,
When all the earth is paradise. Amen

(Presbyterian Hymnal)

[28]DeShazer, observing the significance of naming, and of the old man's ridiculing through epithets, points out that "withholding the two characters' names until the end of the story . . . attaches to the act of naming a sense of affirmation, an almost metaphysical significance." The old woman calls out "David," demanding attention to her needs, "yet with a dignity befitting the moment"; he utters "Eva" twice, first out of despair and, finally, with passion (27). The names are released, finally, by their recognition of mutual betrayal and in an effort, "imploringly," to ask for help. DeShazer observes that the old man receives no response, yet "the vulnerability he acknowledges in calling her name is itself an affirmation of the interdependence of their lives; the act of naming makes possible the long-awaited reconciliation between the two" (27). Whether this act of direct address is a sign of or a means for reconciliation, the old man's utterances are read correctly as the pivot on which the story makes its final turn.

[29]Matt. 7: 9.

[30]The hermeneutic circle is defined as the continuing change in interpretation occasioned by changes in present reality. As process, it becomes a spiral or an arc along which the interpreter focuses, alternately, on a work and on the circumstances reflected in its language and context.

[31]The complex "logic of subjective probability," argues for the verifiability (later termed "validation") of a text's "horizon of meaning," or of the "imaginative reconstruction of the speaking subject." For Hirsch, this "speaking subject" is not identical with the subjectivity of the author (intentional fallacy), but rather with "the most comprehensive level of awareness determinative of verbal meaning" (or of that which can be identified as "the same" in recurrent readings of the text) (1191). To establish" subjective probability," Hirsch examines four criteria: legitimacy ("permissible within the public norms of the *langue*"), correspondence (accounting for "each linguistic component in the text,") generic appropriateness (following the "conventions" of the genre), and coherence (establishing "that the context invoked is the most probable context") (Hirsch 1190-91).

[32]John Dunne's use of analyses by Freud and Kierkegaard of the function of repetition is necessarily selective and open to critical questioning; however, I find it helpful here as historical background on the concept.

[33]In her examination of Olsen's language, DeShazer identifies her "lulling, rhythmical repetition" as "the most memorable feature of 'Tell Me a Riddle.'" For her, key passages contain "an incantatory, musical response which enhances the story's echoing circularity; and the balance achieved by the dual repetition contributes to the restraint and lucidity of Olsen's prose." She finds the iteration of short words and phrases to have "a mystical aura," and that of longer sentences to be both insistent and suggestive of symbolic, as well as literal, meaning--spell-binding, despairful, and, ironically, suggestive of hope (29-30). DeShazer closes with the assessment that Olsen has sought an authentic language--"in its truth lies its power" (31)--thus articulating the suggestibility of the sounds.

Derrida, on the other hand, recognizes repetition as an inevitable complication within all fiction, reflected in its potential for interpretation. And Jonathan Culler's examines "[q]uarrels between critics [as] an uncanny transferential repetition of the drama of the story, so that the most powerful structures of the work emerge not in what the critics say about the work but in their repetition of or implication in the story" (270). (See note 48.) Such complications have led some creative artists to a commitment to literal repetition, to minimize implication: "A rose is a rose is a rose." Olsen would probably consider such preoccupations obscurantism, but her effort at clarity is similarly rhetorical. (See notes 46 and 48.)

[34]The reference is Book I, paragraph 1 of the *Confessions*.

[35]DeShazer comments on catalogues and ellipses as contributions "to the economy of [Olsen's] language and also to its air of mystery," suggesting that "a question or statement is more complex than it initially appears, an aura of something's having been omitted . . . that most queries are only partly answerable" (22). She claims "when even fragments seem too wordy, when words cannot suffice, ellipses marks prevail. . . . No matter how much is said, it is not enough. . . . Hence the elliptical material becomes central to an understanding of the relationships and emotions that comprise the story" (23). For her, Olsen's style suggests "[t]o be human . . . is to seek form in formlessness, to coax meaning from life's nuances, and her fragmented language reinforces this theme" (24). (It is informative, as well, to remember that Olsen was subject to stuttering as a child and still hesitates and repeats when intensely involved in the subject she is addressing.)

DeShazer also finds italics and parentheses in her style "lend a certain poignancy and urgency to the characters' emotional conflicts . . . [and] underscore the fact that it is . . . [the] *inner* life which is real, vital, rhythmic;. . ." (24). Whether Olsen would agree that the inner life is the "real," DeShazer's analysis rewards a careful reading.

[36]Olsen revealed, in her interview, her concept of a creative response to the threat of death: In contrast to the Egyptians whose Houses of the Dead were fixed to open on the Pole Star, the modern challenge is "to use death as testimony against what should never happen to human life again."

[37]In our interview, Tillie Olsen used this quotation from a feature article in the *New York Times*. Wolf (1929-) is an East German novelist, short-story writer, essayist, and former editor of *Neue Deutsche Literatur*, a periodical of literary reviews. In realism that includes autobiographical dimensions, her fiction reflects the political unrest in her country and asserts the right to question, doubt, and investigate alternatives to the official line. Publication of her controversial novel, *The Quest for Christa T.* (issued in this country by Farrar, Strauss in 1971), was postponed by GDR censors for two years as "a pessimistic attempt to replace Marx with Freud." When finally released in a limited edition (four thousand copies), it was available only to customers professionally involved in literature. Her most recent novel, *Kinderheitmuster*, explores life under Hitler and is, in part, her own story of returning to Poland with a daughter who then confronted her with what had happened during Nazi occupation, including her family's capitulation to a program of euthanasia that destroyed her simple-minded Aunt Jette. Olsen's affirmation of Wolf is both ironic and a sign of reconciliation: "Everything that happens, we must try to understand" (*Contemporary Authors* 85-88).

[38]The term "pogrom" refers to a range of destructive acts of violence against both property and persons that often terminate in their annihilation.

[39]Palmer describes Heidegger's view of the intrinsic tension between earth and "world": "Earth represents . . . the primordial source. . . . The work of art, as a happening in which truth comes into unconcealment, represents a capturing of this creative tension in a *form*. . . . To be a work of art means to open up a world. To interpret a work of art means to move into the open

space which the work has brought to stand . . . in such a way that one can *see* it [through] the mysterious process of disclosure whereby being comes into manifest existence" (160-61).

[40]In her role as vacillating questioner and reflexive observer, the bemused mother joins the classic tradition of introspective works--from Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* and Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Wakefield* to the modern anti-hero. In this account, the receding mirrors which duplicate and reverse experience shift their focus from the outside circumstances which act as the narrator's foil to internal consciousness as it struggles over the convoluted nature of knowing itself, and of the language through which knowledge is expressed and confounded.

[41]Commitment to social justice prompted Olsen's first publications--protest poems, articles--and work on a novel.

[42]My use of Ricoeur's first chapter, "Language as Discourse" (1-23), is necessarily summarical. Admitting in his Preface to attempting the impossible, a "philosophy of integral language," he defines discourse in his opening chapter as "a series of dialectical polarities . . . event and meaning . . . sense and reference . . ." that then shape the process of interpretation (23).

[43]The Philippines, a Spanish colony from the sixteenth century, experienced renewed nationalism in the 1880's with the development of the so-called Propaganda Movement. Privileged Filipino students, returning from study in Europe, began writing for magazines and pamphleteering for political reform; among them, Jose Rizal produced a novel, *The Social Cancer*, in 1892, and went on to found the Liga Filipina, a society devoted to advancing Philippine society, but without reference to independence. He was, nonetheless, summarily arrested, exiled to a southern island, and executed in 1896. Rizal Day, December 30, remains a legal holiday in the Islands and commemorates the death of the Filipino patriot shot without trial by Spanish soldiers (Wurfel).

[44]Other critics have emphasized the significance of time in the story, in particular Elaine Neil Orr.

[45]A portion of the "Tell Me a Riddle" manuscript is reproduced in Marlene Barr's article, written for the *DLB:* Twentieth-Century Biography: *American Jewish Fiction Writers.*

Pictured is a 3" x 5" card with a passage from the end of section 3 and the beginning of section 4, written out in Olsen's script--in free verse form, confirming my impression.

[46]The word for "spirit" (or "wind") in Hebrew is "ruach" ("pneuma" in Greek) and refers to both the creative activity of God and the distinctive qualities of human life (Van A. Harvey. *A Handbook of Theological Terms*).

[47]From Emily Dickinson's poem, "Tell all the Truth but tell it slant" (1129).

[48]Jonathan Culler, in his work *On Deconstruction*, discusses the use of echoes and repetitions as viewed in Freud and his critics and in literary criticism (260-80). Culler observes how the compulsion to repeat receives special coloration in literature (connected with "the uncanny," for example) in order to dissociate it from the writer/narrator who can gain integrity, thereby. By seeming to confront an external blocking agent, the writer allays anxiety over "the irreducible figurativeness of one's language . . . [or] the apparently inexplicable notion of the compulsion itself" (216-18). (See note 33.)

In another observation about repetitive patterns, Culler quotes J. Hillis Miller: "'Great works of literature are likely to be ahead of their critics. They are there already. They have anticipated explicitly any deconstruction the critic can achieve. . . . [The critic's task, then, is] to identify the act of deconstruction which has always already, in each case differently, been performed by the text on itself.'" Miller calls for "acts of identification" of these "metalinguistic statements" as essential to the critic's task ("Deconstructing the Deconstructor." *Diacritics* 5 (1975) 31 [qtd. in Culler 269]).

An illustration of this form of repetition at different levels of interpretation comes in the old couple's mutual contradictions (see note 50), and is identified by Culler as "the general tendency to convert a difference within to a difference between" (268). As the old woman and old man each attempt to correct the error in the other's "reading" of the relationship (betrayer/betrayed), the contradictions within each of their views reveals that "a problem within the text [their life as each views it] is transformed into a difference between the text and the critical interpretation [each of them makes] of it" (268), or "the *way* it means for each interpretation contradicts *what* it means" (271). In this analysis, repetition itself becomes a canny offer of insight, and a way through to mediation of difference.

[49]Ricoeur here disagrees with Derrida's distinction between speaking and writing: "What happens in writing is the full manifestation of something that is in a virtual state . . . in living speech, namely the detachment of meaning from the event. But this detachment is not such as to cancel the fundamental structure of discourse discussed in my first essay. The semantic autonomy of the text which now appears is still governed by the dialectic of event and meaning. Moreover, it may be said that this dialectic is made obvious and explicit by writing. Writing is the full manifestation of discourse. To hold, as Jacques Derrida does, that writing has a root distinct from speech and that this foundation has been misunderstood due to our having paid excessive attention to speech, its voice, and its logos, is to overlook the grounding of both modes of the actualization of discourse in the dialectical constitution of discourse" (26). The balance of Ricoeur's second chapter uses Roman Jakobson's article, "Linguistics and Poetics" as basis for a plea that inscription is productive distanciation (25-44).

[50]Jonathan Culler quotes the "Opening Remarks" in Barbara Johnson's *The Critical Difference* as follows: "'Reading, here, proceeds by identifying and dismantling differences by means of other differences that cannot be fully identified or dismantled. The starting point is often a binary difference that is subsequently shown to be an illusion created by the workings of differences much harder to pin down. The differences *between* entities (prose and poetry, man and woman, literature and theory, guilt and innocence) are shown to be based on a repression of differences *within* entities, ways in which an entity differs from itself. But the way in which a text thus differs from itself is never simple: it has a certain rigorous, contradictory logic whose effects can, up to a certain point, be read. The "deconstruction" of a binary opposition is thus not an annihilation of all values or differences; it is an attempt to follow the subtle, powerful effects of differences already at work within the illusion of a binary opposition'"(x-xi [as qtd. in Culler 241-42]). Culler comments: "If deconstructive criticism is a pursuit of differences--differences whose suppression is the condition of any particular entity or position--then it can never reach final conclusions but stops when it can no longer identify and dismantle the differences that work to dismantle other differences" (242). Such a stopping place has been reached in "Tell Me a Riddle" with this contradiction of the contradiction: the old woman condemns failure "to understand," "to teach," but, by pursuing each only secretly, within

herself, she withholds the possibility for both from the old man; the old man, meanwhile, advocates camaraderie and community, but cuts the old woman off from both by monopolizing any socializing experiences early in their life together, thus preventing growth of her sociability. In both cases, "a problem within the text [of the experiences of each] is transformed into a difference between the text and the critical interpretation of it" or "the *way* it means for each interpretation contradicts *what* it means" (see Culler in note 48 above).

[51]The Seder ritual designates that the youngest child ask the opening question--"Why is this night different from all other nights?"--the question which initiates the telling of a people's sacred history.

[52]See Appendix A for Wayne Booth's satiric comment,"The Religion of Rhetoric," in which he develops a scenario for the claim that deconstruction is another "true religion."

[53](See Note 6 for background.) The accession of Alexander III in 1881 signaled reaction--official contempt for the public, the poor, and persecution of dissenting sects and of Jews; and a famine in 1891, coinciding with the reign of Nicholas II, did nothing to relieve public pressure. Growth of industry under an autocracy of the intelligentsia, however, inspired both liberalism and socialism in the cities and among the peasants. As Jewish townsmen adopted these ideas, Russian bureaucrats persecuted them as socialists, the peasants shunned them as capitalists, and scapegoating through officially sanctioned pogroms was the result.

Finally, distinct political movements emerged in Russia: in 1898, the Social Democrats (including a majority of the Bolsheviks) who advocated a socialist order focused on industrialization and the working class; in 1901, the Social Revolutionaries (the Mensheviks, part of a European movement for cooperative change) who supported limited capitalism and a socialist system of village communes with peasants working the land. Russia's 1905 defeat in the Russo-Japanese War brought greater unrest at home, protest marches, strikes, and pogroms (in the Ukraine and Russia against the Jews; in Azerbaijan against the Armenians), and the Jan. 22 march on the Winter Palace left hundreds dead or injured. By the following October, a rail strike led to the formation of the Soviet Council of Workers' Deputies, and the Duma, first established in St. Petersburg, demanded redistribution of estates to the peasants, amnesty for political prisoners, rights for Jews and religious dissenters, and autonomy for Poland. In spite

of these efforts, the threatened failure of the revolution and the persecutions that would follow sent large numbers of Jews emigrating from the Pale, the crescent of land between the Black Sea and the Baltic, which had been their home for centuries (Seton-Watson).

Further weakened by Rasputin's influence upon the Tsar, the thousand-year monarchy finally ended in 1917, while the Bolsheviks, with Lenin and Stalin, and the left-wing of the Mensheviks under Trotsky continued the civil war, and, in 1918, established a dictatorship of the proletariat under one-party rule. But the Romanov dynasty fell, according to the British historian, Bernard Pares, "by its own insufficiency, . . . at a moment least desired by the Duma, in the midst of a foreign war . . . when the whole framework of administration had been thrown into chaos and stretched to breaking point . . . and there was nothing ready to replace it" (489). Russia's on-going struggle would continue to influence its emigrees around the world.

[54]Eugene Victor Debs (1855-1926), early socialist leader in America, began as a railroad fireman and went on to found, in 1880, the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen. In 1894, after serving for ten years in the Indiana legislature, he organized the American Railway Union on industrial rather than trade-union basis, and led a successful strike against the Great Northern Railway. He was later imprisoned for breaking an injunction in the Pullman Strike and used his term of incarceration to read extensively in socialist literature. He subsequently played a significant role in founding the American Socialist Party, in 1898, and was five times its presidential candidate, drawing over 96,000 votes in the 1920 campaign which he waged from prison. (The Socialist party, having adopted pacifism, refused to support the war effort, and Debs was sentenced to ten years for denouncing the prosecution of resisters under the Espionage Act of 1917.) Released by Harding in 1921, he suffered poor health but continued to speak and write, revered by many as a martyr for his principles (*New Columbia Encyclopedia*).

In the Preface to his *Writers on the Left* (a "social chronicle of the Left Wing writer [non-aligned, socialist, and communist] from 1912 to the early 1940's,"), Daniel Aaron states: "a very small fraction of the Left Wing writers were once members of the Communist Party. A considerably larger number . . . 'fellow travellers' . . . sympathized with the objectives of the party, wrote for the party press, or knowingly affiliated with associations sponsored by the party." Aaron concludes, "the Communist Party had far less influence on writers than the *idea* of

communism or the image of Soviet Russia" (xvii). He identifies Debs as an early "activist in the revolutionary movement," one of the "'soft' leadership" among American socialists (13, 120).

Upton Sinclair's *The Cry for Justice* anthologizes a quotation from Eugene Debs: "While there is a lower class, I am in it. While there is a criminal element, I am of it. While there is a soul in jail, I am not free" (144).

[55]Aaron describes *The Comrade* founded in 1901, as "devoted expressly to Socialist art and literature. Future Socialist party leaders served on its board, but its editors stated in its first issue: "'While we firmly believe in the importance of the economic factor in the development of society . . . [o]ur mission is to mirror Socialist thought as it finds expression in Art and Literature'" (1 [1901] 12, qtd. in Aaron 18). Its literary standards proved "tepidly bourgeois," according to Aaron, but the editors did apply socialist theory in their critiques of works, authors, and Tolstoyan anarchists. Managed by the artists themselves, the magazine also carried independent analysis and reflections on the validity of Socialist and Communist policy. But its circulation never exceeded a few thousand, and it was soon absorbed by *The International Socialist Review.*

[56]*The Cry for Justice: An Anthology of the Literature of Social Protest* is characterized in its introduction by Jack London as a "humanist Holy Book," and he identifies the aim of its editor, Upton Sinclair, as inducement--"very simple, and yet most difficult"--to "sympathy in its fine correct sense," to unselfishness and "a commitment, not to profit, but to service" (3-5). Named on its title page as "[t]he writings of philosophers, poets, novelists, social reformers, and others who have voiced the struggle against social injustice," it includes descriptions of suffering from want and fear, throughout human history, by classical and modern writers of both East and West. London closes with a call: "Comes now the time to make a world" (5). *The Cry for Justice* published in 1915, significantly influenced reform movements in the early decades of this century.

[57]*Poetry Magazine* and *The Little Review* were among the "little magazines," publications more interested in literary than in political issues. With such contributors as Ezra Pound, Gertrude Stein, Amy Lowell, and Robert Frost, it appealed to the European-minded, according to Aaron--that is, to those who, though concerned with American life, tended to be aristocratic,

subjective, and indifferent to public opinion. Preoccupied with individualism and the aesthetic, such writers contrasted with contributors to *The Dial* who were more radical, and to the *Atlantic Monthly*, who were, in general, conservative by comparison (28-29).

[58]Predecessor of the *New Masses, The Masses*, founded in 1911 by Piet Vlag, expanded under the editorship of Max Eastman after 1912. It featured the fiction of Tolstoy and other Europeans but also ran muckraker articles and writings by direct-action socialists. In 1914, when John Reed joined its editorial staff, it became "a revolutionary and not a reform magazine," devoted to exposing the rigid and the dogmatic among the more respected political organs. *The Masses* appealed to rebels, not only among seasoned radicals but also teenagers and small-town sympathizers across thecountry, with its support of the working-class struggle against capitalist exploitation. Contributors--from Upton Sinclair to Menckenians to Socialists, Anarchists, and Bohemians--were typically not "party" people, refusing to subordinate art to social-political issues (Aaron 20-25). But when Jack Reed, then participant as correspondent-adventurer in the revolutionary movement in Russia, began to appear in its pages, it was finally indicted for promoting mutiny in the armed forces and allegedly obstructing enlistment. The government banned the Nov. and Dec., 1917 issues from the mails, and its successor, *The Liberator*, appeared in Feb., 1918, with Max Eastman as editor (40).

Their successor, *New Masses*, first published in May, 1926, continued with a range of opinion on the left; but, no longer under the direction of artists, its editorial policies were contested between liberals and radicals. By 1928, it assumed a more modest format and was publishing, under Max Gold's direction, "'semi-articulate voices hidden in the mines, textile mills, farms, saw mills, and lumber camps,'" according to one proletarian contributor (Aaron 203). By 1930, its policies were gauged to encourage not only young writers, but also the work of both Socialist and Communist spokespeople (199). Aaron observes that "with such writers as Theodore Dreiser, Sherwood Anderson, Waldo Frank, Granville Hicks, Newton Arvin, Malcolm Cowley, Clifton Fadiman, Lionel Trilling, Edmund Wilson, Edwin Seaver, and others swinging leftward, literary radicalism had become 'a mainstream affair'" (191). Critics of reform, of capitalism, and of fascism expressed support for the Communist program and its

critique. By 1934 Granville Hicks became editor of New Masses; in 1935 he joined the Communist Party (356).

[59]Aaron cites the founding of *Modern Quarterly* as 1923, when V. F. Calverton reorganized a small Johns Hopkins University publication as "a kind of intellectual brokerage house for revolution" (322-23). Denying distinction between worker and intellectual, between pure art and propaganda, Calverton was committed to socialism and went through a pro-Communist period. But by 1939 he became dissillusioned by American Marxist's ideological rigidity (323-28).

[60]I do not find Olsen's journals in the published bibliographies I have consulted and assume, therefore, that they remain the sole possession of the author. The theme of being "pulled both ways" will eventually refer also to faithfulness to her craft and commitment to political action.

[61]Rebecca Harding Davis, popularly recognized for her prolific output in the later decades of the nineteenth century, received renewed critical attention with Olsen's recognition of her work, *Life in the Iron Mills,* and its republication by the Feminist Press in 1972.

[62]Olsen's two poems, "I Want You Women Up North to Know" and "There Is a Lesson," appeared in the *Partisan* in Mar. and Apr., 1934, respectively. I have not been able to discover the relation of this publication to *The Partisan Review,* the first issue of which Aaron dates as Feb., 1934.

[63]Aaron writes that the *New Masses,* "as part of the magazine's program to develop promising artists of the proletariat, . . . founded the John Reed Club of New York shortly after the stock market crash of 1929" (213). Its literary branch was to encourage writers to become experts in a single industry, thus producing written publicity for strikes and promoting first-hand experience with the labor movement. The development of such a nation-wide cultural ront to cover the conditions of industry was to make of *The New Masses* an organ of the working class (213). Named for the"model activist intellectual" whom the Russian Communist Party also featured as an American sympathizer, the Club promoted both service and investigative reporting in the spirit of this "young martyr buried in the Kremlin," who had become a legend for his participation in the Russian Revolution as a concerned and "enlightened" American. It became the purpose of the Clubs, that soon proliferated around the country, not only to cultivate young proletariat writers, but to incorporate "fellow traveler" intellectuals into Communist circles in

order to encourage and guide their movement further to the left in support of revolutionary thought (213- 28).

[64]The *New Republic* during this period was at times identified with the Communist Party line, according to Aaron, especially through the writing of Malcolm Cowley who "spoke for it, defended it, encouraged its writers, yet . . . never gave himself completely to it" (335).

[65]*Partisan Review*, as literary organ of the New York City John Reed Club, published primarily the work of established writers rather than of young club members. More literary than *The New Masses* according to Daniel Aaron, it was nonetheless founded with its support, publishing a first issue in Feb.-Mar., 1934. The two magazines came to represent ideological and critical approaches to the Left, respectively; in 1937, the *Partisan Review* was reorganized as an anti-Stalinist organ "free to attack the politics as well as the aesthetics of the official party line" (302).

[66]During this period, Aaron claims, Wilson was deemed "chief representative of the economic determinist school" by his opponents, but was critical of both Marxist and humanist literary criticism as too dogma-related. He rejected both "'Communist hacks, with their slavish subserviency to Russia and their ridiculous efforts to make Russian conditions apply to the United States [and] the catty bourgeois anti-Marxists who talked as if the Communists were bent upon obliterating the culture of the past and compelling every writer to become a propagandist'" (*New Republic* 67 [Aug. 1933] 43, qtd. in Aaron 251-52). Though he asserted socialism could contribute to a positive change in American cultural values, he "took his stand between those who thought that intellectual, moral, and aesthetic activity operated in a social vacuum, and those who thought of human conduct solely in terms of economic appetite" (252). (Sources for Aaron's assessment: Wilson's articles in the New Republic, May, 1932, to Aug., 1933.)

[67]Aaron identifies *The Anvil,* published in Moberly, Missouri, and edited by novelist Jack Conroy, as proletarian, like *Partisan Review*, with which it merged briefly in 1936.

At this time, Lerner's loyalties--to family, politics,and writing--came in sharper conflict. As Richard Wright attested: "I asked for a definition of what was expected from the writers [by the Communist Party]--books or political activity. Both was the answer" (*The God That Failed* 121).

[68]Hippolyte Taine's *History of the English Language* first acknowledged the beginnings of Naturalism (1863-64), and Emile Zola's *The Experimental Novel* became the manifesto of the school (1880). In the United States, muckraking developed from yellow journalism of the 1890's, with Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* as prototype (1906). Davis' novel precedes their "slice of life" depictions by decades (and the realism of Norris, Crane, and James), while it parallels realism in European literature without apparent influence.

[69]The *Atlantic Monthly*, though representative of the literary establishment, was open to a spectrum of points of view; as a prestigious journal, its influence in promoting women writers was significant.

[70]See Appendix for the original "Reading List."

[71]The publisher's note on Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* comments upon the basis for his theory of education: ". . . every human being, no matter how 'ignorant' or submerged in the 'culture of silence,' is capable of looking critically at his world in a dialogical encounter with others." Education at all levels, according to Freire, should involve, therefore, the immediate situation of the student, allowing him or her to "perceive his personal and social reality and deal critically with it. When an illiterate peasant participates in this sort of educational experience he comes to a new awareness of self, a new sense of dignity; . . . a new hope." Olsen's belief that access to expression is fundamental to the realization and development of an individual's humanity would acknowledge the relevance of Freire's pedagogy in all cultures.

[72]I find no firm date for Olsen's decision to leave the Communist Party. The reference in Duncan to the change in her orientation suggests, however, earlier rather than later, the late 30's or early 40's rather than the 50's.

In Richard Crossman's edition of six writers' comments about their conversion to Communism and later withdrawal from the Party, Richard Wright documents his reception as a racial and economic minority member. Encouraged by the Party to write and participate as an equal, he developed his craft and his political stance, at first within, but eventually outside the discipline of the Communist International. For his need for freedom of enquiry and of artistic expression finally led to "the least-known factor of living . . . the human heart, the least-sought

goal of being . . . a way to live a human life"--outside the Party--"not because I wanted to, but because I felt that I had to if I were to live at all" (146).

Ignazio Silone, another recruit from the underclass (of his native Italy), testifies to disillusionment with the Communist Party's fanaticism, centralization, and abstracted discipline. However, he also voices a continuing faith in socialism: "The more Socialist theories claim to be 'scientific,' the more transitory they are; but Socialist values are permanent. . . . On a group of theories one can found a school; but on a group of values one can found a culture, a civilization, a new way of living together . . ." (102). Silone defines "Socialist values" as belief in the human capacity to shape "destiny," to extend the ethical impulse beyond individual and family to humanity at large, and to value brotherhood and the human person over social and economic mechanisms (101). I believe the distinctions and loyalties acknowledged by Wright and Silone offer clues to Olsen's reasons for leaving the Party as well.

In an analysis of the writer's role in the social and political crises of the 1920's and 30's, Richard H. Pells traces both Messianic communalism (both Marxist and non-Marxist) and detached individualism in the columns of the *New Masses,* the *Modern Quarterly,* the *New Republic,* and the *Nation.* He includes also what he calls a middle position eventually taken by such critics as Edmund Wilson and Kenneth Burke: that the writer as intellectual continue to be "the custodian of ultimate values, the cultural conscience of the larger society"; for the subtle, ambiguous labor of the critic required independence and "represented the most sophisticated answer to the dilemma of how the man of thought could also be a man of action" (192-93). Olsen struggled to maintain both functions--as a woman of thought and a woman of action.

[73]Aaron, refers in a footnote to James Agee's work picturing "the shabby but clean yeomanry of revolutionary stock who spoke 'a pure unmodernized English,' and who still retained the American revolutionary fire." They, along with the Negro, in Aaron's terminology, were the victims of oppression in the South upon which the Communists "cast a lurid light . . . sometimes distorting it almost beyond recognition and yet highlighting its sores and deformities" (179). The investigation of miners' strikes in Harlan and Bell Counties, Kentucky, in 1931, by a committee of writers sponsored by the Communist-organized National Committee for the Defense of Political Prisoners, revealed blacklisting, unlawful raids, and intimidation through

starvation and hooliganism far in excess of the committee's original suspicions (178). The civil rights movement of the 60's confirmed and further documented these conditions.

[74]See notes 33 and 35. DeShazer on style.

[75]Daniel Aaron suggests that Lincoln Steffens, mentor to John Reed, had by the 30's "stopped 'thinking' about Communism and simply accepted it" (129). He quotes a letter Steffens wrote to his wife, Ella Winter, claiming Russia was not "'Trotsky and his fate and Stalin and his policies,'" but the policies and ideas of the Communist Party for which Steffens had become a propagandist (129-30).

[76]In Jan., 1935, *New Masses* published the "Call for an American Writers' Congress," for late April and early May in New York City--its main purpose, to form the League of American Writers (affiliate of the International Union of Revolutionary Writers) as means to advance "a revolutionary political program" (Aaron 282-83). A condition of the conference was the liquidation of the John Reed Clubs and the promotion of established writers of the Left (to the neglect of the young literary aspirants originally targeted for cultivation by the Clubs). The Congress, attended largely by allies of the Communist Party, heard addresses on the relation of art and politics, in particular in regard to the program and policies of the Party. Concerned with the immediate issues of the Depression, war, and fascism, delegates of a spectrum of points of view had their attitudes confirmed by speakers such as Earl Browder, Malcolm Cowley, Michael Gold, Granville Hicks, James T. Farrell, and Kenneth Burke.

A Midwest Conference met in Chicago in the spring of 1936, and the following November, a Western Writers' Congress was addressed in San Francisco by Upton Sinclair, Mike Gold, and Harry Bridges. But plans for a second national gathering were dropped when the outbreak of the Civil War in Spain during the intervening summer spurred interest in the fight against the forces of facism and news of the Moscow trials (1937) alienated large numbers of potential participants. For the "arraignment and execution of the old Bolsheviks blurred the sharp distinction between Communism and fascism the party had been so assiduously fostering" (306-08). The Nazi-Soviet trade and non-aggression pacts followed in August, 1939, further discouraging adherence to the Party, except among the ideologically committed who remained through the Khrushchev revelations of the Stalinist era (1956).

Aaron concludes that the positive influences of the party program on writers, both sympathizers and critics, were significant: the stirring up of controversy, the discovery of new talent in fiction and drama, the opening up of hidden and neglected areas of life in the United States for scrutiny and reform, and the overcoming of isolation, among writers in general, from the issues of their time (396). As a struggling young journalist and aspiring novelist of the period, Tillie Olsen learned both commitment and questioning from the perspective on world events that she imbibed during the '20's and '30's. But she, like many other "writers on the left," was eventually to change allegiances and develop another focus for analysis and expression.

[77]Jonathan Culler comments on Derrida's analysis of the function and role of misreading in interpretation: ". . . 'misreading' retains the trace of truth, because noteworthy readings involve claims to truth and because interpretationis structured by the attempt to catch what other readings have missed and misconstrued. Since no reading can escape correction, all readings are misreadings; but this leaves not a monism but a double movement. Against the claim that they are errors because they strive toward but fail to attain a true reading, one maintains that true readings are only particular misreadings: misreadings whose misses have been missed. This account of misreading is not, perhaps, a coherent, consistent position, but, its advocates would claim, it resists metaphysical idealizations and captures the temporal dynamic of our interpretive situation" (178). Culler carries the implications of these insights further: "Like other inversions, the reversal of relations between understanding and misunderstanding disrupts a structure on which institutions have relied. . . . In general, inversions of hierarchical oppositions expose to debate the institutional arrangements that rely on the hierarchies, and thus open possibilities of change--possibilities which may well come to little but which may also at some point prove critical" (178-79). I believe Tillie Olsen's fiction attempts to instigate such inversions and challenge such arrangements precisely in the interests of change.

[78]The *New York Times* quotes Elie Wiesel, Holocaust survivor and Nobel Prize recipient (1986), upon the dedication of the memorial, February 4, 1990, at Miami Beach, Florida: "The disturbing, moving memorial, dominated by a 42-foot-tall bronze hand with sculptured figures climbing it, is for a tragedy 'beyond words and beyond imagination, but not beyond memory'"

("Memorial" A17). Helen Fagin, retired University of Miami professor of Judaic studies, is credited with initiating the project, but the sculptor is unnamed.

[79]Listed in *Women's Studies: Recommended Core Bibliography: 1980-85* as a publication in honor of the fiftieth anniversary of the Feminist Press, this work is described as "a moving collection of poems, letters, short fiction, diary excerpts on concerns of women. . . . Social contexts of the pieces range from eighth-century Japan to rural Nigeria and contemporary America" (234).

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APPENDIX A

WAYNE BOOTH: "THE RELIGION OF RHETORIC"

Wayne Booth, as visiting scholar at Princeton University in the spring of 1984, presented a series of lectures on "The Religion of Rhetoric" that also suggested the appropriate limits of deconstruction in its influence on current criticism. Claiming that deconstructionist theory had become for some adherents a form of "true religion," he called for its demystification. His lectures exposed what he characterized as deconstruction's pretense to harmonize cognitive with spiritual needs through its offering of a kind of substitute truth, faith, hope, love, and humility to its converts.

Booth satirized deconstructionist truth in terms familiar to orthodox religion as a kind of sacred "mysterium tremendum," inexpressible and thus "wholly other," but celebrated in ritual and "ironology." The search for a center that can make promises, unmasking all presences, thus ends in language as "the inescapably ironic" that "can be relied upon to be unreliable." Dependent on language "that can be shown to say opposites," its devotees, according to Booth, are created in acts of reading, but are ultimately unreadable, achieving only temporary "claritas" in epiphanies familiar to modern literature. Finally, in Booth's parody, the power of implacable resistance in the creator is lodged in irony's systematic undoing of understanding always inherent in discourse.

Through this indeterminacy of language, Booth asserted, faith becomes centered on substance-not-seen, used as validation of claims. Belief grounds understanding. So-called logo-centered thought gives way to faith in the text as of infinite interest, and as arena for free-play for radically flawed creatures. The hope beyond the fortunate fall into indeterminacy is for bliss in the contemplation of the imponderable, presided over by the "cognoscenti" and their incantations concerning the mysteries, which suggest that the texts can save us by what we do with them. Made by language that is always both revealing and hidden, our textuality prevents our ever

"fixing" on anything that we are then responsible for, at the same time remaining our polysemic comforter as writing generates more writing.

The "deconites," as Booth terms them, are not stern binary-ists; charitable toward fellow creatures, they fix no grounds for judgment, requiring only proper respect for and openness to their psychoanalytic stance toward society and everything it penetrates. According to this scheme, if faith is sufficient, then bliss supplants anxiety.

The contradiction in the deconstructionist "faith," according to the criticism Booth developed next, lies in the contrast between exclusivist vision (clarity about literature at its most rigorous and most unreliable) and the humilty required before its recombination of rationality and irrationalism. The negative way, or being led to think the "not yet conceived," is liberating, not a as goal, but as a means toward a reality not grasped through language. Grace of language as comforter becomes the analogue to revelation, while interpretation assures suffering from learning/learning from suffering. Thus Booth's parody of religion à la deconstruction supports Tracy's contradiction of semiology as closed system, and leads back as well to an interpretation of sentences and whole texts, however tentative and "open," that attempts to identify the most congruent readings and their interaction within self, world, and language.

APPENDIX B

TILLIE OLSEN'S READING LIST

WINTER 1972

A SPECTRUM

Novels

Story of an African Farm by Olive Schreiner
Middlemarch by Gearge Eliot
The Mill on the Floss by George Eliot
The Awakening by Kate Chopin
To the Lighthouse by Virginia Woolf
Cement by F. Gladkov
Daughter of Earth by Agnes Smedley
The Man Who Loved Children by Christina Stead
The Dollmaker by Harriette Arnow
Ultima Thule by H. H. Richardson
Time of Man by Elizabeth Madox Roberts
Put Off Thy Shoes by Ethel Voynich

Stories

"The Revolt of the Mother" in *Best Stories of Mary Wilkins Freeman*
"A Jury of Her Peers," by Susan Glaspell in *U.S. Stories* ed. Martha Foley
"Nor-Bibi's Crime" by Vera Inber in *Short Stories of Russia Today*
"Wagner Matinee," in Willa Cather's *Youth and the Bright Medusa*
"Old Mortality" and the Old Order stories, in Katherine Anne Porter's *The Collected Stories*
"Prelude," "At the Bay," and "Six Years After," in Katherine Mansfield's *Collected Stories*
"Babushka Farnham," in Dorothy Canfield Fisher's *Fables for Parents*
"The Bed Quilt," in Dorothy Canfield Fisher's *Vermont Lives*
"Story of an Hour" in Kate Chopin's *Collected Works*
"Between Men," in Doris Lessing's *A Man and Two Women*
"The Yellow Wallpaper" by Charlotte Perkins Gilman
"The Darling" by Anton Chekhov
"The Sky is Gray," in Earnest Gaines' *Bloodline*

Lives

Eighty Years or More by Elizabeth Cady Stanton
A Mortal Flower by Han Suyin

Literature

A Room of One's Own by Virginia Woolf
Thinking About Women by Mary Ellman

SPRING 1973

MOST WOMEN'S LIVES

Four 100 Year Old Women

Grandmother Brown: Her First Hundred Years (1827-1927) ed. Harriet Connor Brown
Mountain Wolf Woman, Sister of Crashing Thunder: Autobiography of a Winnebago Indian. ed. Nancy O. Lurie

Autobiography of Mother Jones. ed. Mary Field Parton
The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman by Earnest Gaines.

Fiction

Alcott, Louisa May, "Transcendental Wild Oats," in Bronson.
Alcott, *Fruitlands,* comp. by Clara Endicott Sears.
Cather, Willa. *My Antonia.*
Childress, Alice. *Wedding Band.*
Dinesen, Isak, *"Sorrow-acres,"* in *Winter Tales.*
Ellis, Katherine. *Life of an Ordinary Woman.*
Fisher, Dorothy Canfield. *"Ann Story,"* in *A Harvest of Stories.*
Glasgow, Ellen. *Barren Ground; Vein of Iron.*
Greenberg, Joanne. *In This Sign.*
Hansberry, Lorraine. *Raisin in the Sun.*
Hughes, Mary Gray. "The Thousand Springs," in *The Thousand Springs.*
Le Sueur, Meridel. "The Annunciation," in *The Annunciation.*
Lewis, Janet. *The Wife of Martin Guerre.*
Mansfield, Katherine, "The Woman at the Store," in *The Short Stories of Katherine Mansfield.*
Marriot, Alice. *Ten Grandmothers.*
Murray, Pauli. *Proud Shoes.*
Petry, Ann. *Street.*
Porter, Katherine Anne. "The Jilting of Granny Weatherall," in *The Old Order.*
Walker, Alice. *The Third Life of Grange Copeland.*
Walker, Margaret. *Jubilee.*
Wilder, Laura Ingalls. Children's series, including *By the Shores of Silver Lake=These Happy Golden Years.*
Woolf, Virginia. "Memories of a Working Women's Guild," in *The Captain's Death Bed.*
Wright, Sarah. *This Chile's Goin To Live.*

Slaveys, Servants, Servers

Anderson, Barbara. *Southbound.*
Chekhov, Anton. "A Sleepyhead," in *The Short Stories of Anton Chekhov.*
Childress, Alice. *Like One of the Family: Conversations from a Domestic's Life.*
Emerson, Ralph Waldo. "Mary Moody Emerson," in Lectures and Biographical Sketches.
Hellman, Lillian. Sophronia in *An Unfinished Woman.*
Hurst, Fannie. *Lummox.*
Mansfield, Katherine. "The Child Who Was Tired," "Life of Ma Parker," and "The Tiredness of Rosabel," in *The Short Stories of Katherine Mansfield.*
Parker, Dorothy. "Clothe the Naked," in *Collected Stories.*
Porter, Katherine Anne. Hatsy in "Holiday," *Collected Stories.*
Powell, Margaret. *Below Stairs.*

Myth Dispellers

Peretz, Isaac Laeb. "She Women," in *Stories and Pictures.*
Reyher, Rebecca H. *Zulu Woman*

Some Women in Works by Men

Agee, James. *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men.*
Chekhov, Anton. "In the Ravine" and "Peasants," in *Seven Short Novels.*
Clarke, Adam. *Memoires of the Wesley Family.*
DuBois, W. E. B. Josie in "On the Meaning Of Progress," *The Souls of Black Folk.*
Gorky, Maxim. Gorky's grandmother in *Childhood.*
______. *Mother.*
Hardy, Thomas. *Tess of the D'Urbervilles.*
Lawrence, D.H. *Sons and Lovers.*
O'Casey, Sean. *Collected Plays*; "Mrs. Cassidy Takes A Holiday," in *Inishfallen Fare Thee Well.*
Rolvaag, O. E. *Giants in the Earth.*
Sinclair, Upton. *The Jungle.*
Wright, Richard. "Bright and Morning Star'" in *Uncle Tom's Children.*
Zola, Emile. *L'Assommoir; Germinal,* (Section 1, part 2).

SUMMER 1973

MOST WOMEN'S LIVES (continued)

Mothering and Wifehood

Arnow, Harriet. *The Dollmaker*
Brown, Harriet. *Grandmother Brown, Her First Hundred Years*
Richardson, H. H. *Ultima Thule*
Stead, Christina. *The Man Who Loved Children*
Woolf, Virginia. *To the Lighthouse*
Wright, Sarah. *This Chile's Goin to Live*

Stories

Cather, Willa. "Wagner's Matinee" in *Troll Garden.*
Gaines, Ernest. "The Sky Is Gray" in *Bloodline*
Mansfield, Katherine. "Six Years After" in *The Short Stories of Katherine Mansfield.*

Fiction

Colette. *My Mother's House* and other glimpses of Sido in *Earthly Paradise*
Fisher, Dorothy Canfield. *Fables for Parents,* especially "The Forgotten Mother"
Lessing, Doris. The section, "Free Women II," in *The Golden Notebook*
Paley, Grace. *The Little Disturbances of Man*
Roth, Henry. *Call It Sleep*
Schreiner. Olive, *From Man to Man*
Struther, Jan. "Three Stockings" in *Mrs. Miniver*

Other

Jameson, Storm. *Journey to the North* (autobiography)
Life and Letters of Harriet Beecher Stowe, Annie Fields, ed.

WINTER 1974

FORMS AND FORMINGS: THE YOUNGER YEARS

The Younger Years: A Spectrum of Girlhoods

Charlotte Brontë. *Jane Eyre.*
George Eliot. *Mill On The Floss.*
Louisa May Alcott. *Little Women.*
Benjamin A. Botkin. "Jenny Proctor's Story" in *Lay My Burden Down: A Folk History of Slavery.*
Olive Schreiner. *Story of An African Farm.*
Sarah Grand. *The Beth Book.*
Elizabeth Cady Stanton. *Eighty Years Or More.*
Nancy Lurie, ed. *Mountain Wolf Woman.*
Laura Ingalls Wilder. *Little House in the Big Woods* to *These Happy Golden Years.*
Mary Johnston. *Hagar.*
Agnes Smedley. *Daughter of Earth.*
Vera Brittain. *Testimony of Youth*
Catherine Cookson. *Our Kate.*
Olivia. *Olivia.*
Elizabeth Madox Roberts. *Time of Man.*
Katherine Anne Porter. "The Grave," and Miranda in "Old Order Stories" in *Leaning Tower and Other Stories*
Dawn Powell. *My Home is Far Away*
James Agee. Young Emma and Ivy in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men.*
Christina Stead. *The Man Who Loved Children.* (patriarchy)
Lore Segal. *Other People's Houses.*
Paule Marshall. *Brown Girl, Brown Stones.*
Toni Morrison. *The Bluest Eye.*

Alix Kate Shulman. *Memoirs of an Ex-Prom Queen*
A trilogy of the 1950's, preferably read as a cluster:
Sylvia Plath. *The Bell Jar*
Hannah Green (Joanne Greenberg). *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden.*
Barbara Probst Solomon. *The Beat of Life.*
H. C. Brown *Grandmother Brown: Her First Hundres Years.*
Zdena Berger. *Tell Me Another Morning* (girlhood in Auschwitz)
Jeanette Everly. *Bonnie Jo, Go Home* (a pregnant teenager).

<u>Girlhood Labor (in addition to unpaid, necessary household labor)</u>
Dorothy Sterling. *Freedom Train: The Life of Harriet Tubman.*
Herman Melville. "Paradise of Bachelors and Tartarus of Maids" in *Complete Stories.*
Rebecca Harding Davis. *Margaret Howth.*
Elizabeth Stuart Phelps. *The Silent Partner.*
Elizabeth Stuart Phelps. "28th of January" in *Sixteen For One*
Ida Pruitt. *Daughter of Han.*
Lucy Larcom. *New England Girlhood. An Idyl of Work.*
Emile Zola. Seventeen-year-old Catherine in *Germinal.*
W. E. B. Dubois. Josie in "On the Meaning of Progress" in *The Souls of Black Folks.*
Katherine Mansfield. "The Child Who Was Tired" in *Short Stories.*
Anton Chekhov. "Sleepyhead" in *Best Known Works.*
L. B. Honwana. "Dina" in *We Killed Mangy Dog and Other Stories of Mozambique.*
<u>Childhoods</u>
Dorothy Canfield. *Understood Betsy.*
George Madden Martin. *Emmy Lou: Her Book and Heart.*
Ruth Holland. *Mill Child.*
Katherine Mansfield. "The Doll's House," "Prelude," and "At the Bay" in *Short Stories.*
<u>Dawnings, Flowerings, Strivings. Sexuality</u>
May Sinclair. *Mary Olivier.*
Dorothy Richardson. "Honeycomb," *Pilgrimage*, Vol. I.
Colette. *Claudine.*
Rosamond Lehmann. *Dusty Answer.*
Rosamond Lehmann. *Invitation to the Waltz.*
Emily Carr. *The Book of Small Growing Pains.*
Anzia Yezierska. *Arrogant Beggar.*
Henry Handel Richardson. *Growing Pains. The End of a Childhood.*
Isabel Bolton Miller. *Under Gemini.*
Jessamyn West. Her girl self in *Hide and Seek. Cress Delahanty.*
Josephine Johnson. *Now in November.*
"I Was 16," in *Winter Orchard, and other stories.*
Jo Sinclair. *The Changeling.*
Doris Lessing. *Martha Quest.*
Hannah Green. *The Dead of the House.*
Carson McCullers. *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter.*
Carson McCullers. *Member of the Wedding.*
Violet LeDuc. "The Golden Button" in *The Woman with the Little Fox.*
Katherine Mansfield. "The Wind Blows" and "Garden Party" in *Short Stories.*
Christina Stead. *Salzburg Tales.* Teresa in *For Love Alone.*
Eudora Welty. "Livvie" in *Selected Stories.*
Dorothy Parker. "The Waltz" in *Collected Stories.*
Betty Smith. *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn.*
Jean Stafford. "The Tea Time of Stout Hearted Ladies" in *Best American Short Stories 1965.*
Maxine Kumin. *Through Dooms of Love.*
Lenore Marshall. *Hill is Level.*
Jane Mayhall. *Cousin to Human.*
Maureen Howard. "Bridgeport Bus" in *Prize Stories 1962: The O'Henry Awards.*
Alice Munro. *Lives of Girls and Women. Dance of the Happy Shade*
Blanche Boyd. *Nerves.*
Toni Cade Bambara. *Gorilla, My Love.*

Anne Moody. *Coming of Age in Mississippi.*
Joyce Varney. *Welsh Story.*
Maya Angelou. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings.*

Writers About Themselves

Ellen Glasgow. *The Woman Within.*
Storm Jameson. *Journey to the North.*
Zelda Fitzgerald. *Save Me the Waltz.*
Henry Handel Richardson. *Myself When Young.*

Appearance

Doris Lessing. "Notes for a Case History" in *A Man and Two Women*

Rarities

Mary Webb. *Precious Bane.*
Nancy Hale. *New England Girlhood.*
Katherine Hathaway. *The Little Locksmith*

Rape, Brutality, Degradations, Prostitution

Jean Rhys. *Good Morning, Midnight.*
Dorothy Parker. "Mr. Durant" in *Collected Stories.*
Christina Stead. *The Puzzleheaded Girl.*
Olive Schreiner. Bertie in *From Man to Man.*
Samuel Richardson. *Clarissa.*
Nelson Algren. *Never Come Morning.*
John Reed. *Daughter of the Revolution.*
Eudora Welty. "At the Landing" in *Wide Net, and Other Stories.*
Katherine Mansfield. "The Little Governess" in *Short Stories.*
Patricia Griffith. "Nights at O'Rourkes" in *Prize Stories 1970.*
Bertolt Brecht. "The Infanticide of Marie Farrar" in *Selected Poems.*

Assumption Girls Belong to Their Elders

Jean Stafford. "The Liberation" in *Stories.*
Nancy Hale. "Rich People" in *The Pattern of Perfection.*

VITA

Mary Lehman McLean

Candidate for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Thesis: PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST AS AN OLD WOMAN: TILLIE OLSEN'S METAPHOR *IN TELL ME A RIDDLE* AS UNDERSTOOD THROUGH PAUL RICOEUR'S *INTERPRETATION THEORY: DISCOURSE AND THE SURPLUS OF MEANING*

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