



The Development of Identity in Tillie Olsen's *Yonnondio: from the Thirties*

Senior Paper

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For a Degree Bachelor of Arts with
A Major in Literature at
The University of North Carolina at Asheville
Spring 2018

By *Renee Ambroso*


Thesis Director
Dr. Dee James


Thesis Advisor
Dr. Erica Abrams Locklear

Dr. James

LIT 498

10 April, 2018

The Development of Identity in Tillie Olsen's *Yonnondio: from the Thirties*

Published in 1974, Tillie Olsen wrote *Yonnondio: from the Thirties* from 1932 to either 1936 or 1937.¹ Despite signing a contract with Random House in 1934, Olsen set the unfinished book aside when the demands of marriage, motherhood, and various jobs left her with little time or energy to work on the book. About forty years later, Olsen recovered her manuscript and made the decision not to revise or add to the original text before publishing. Olsen's first and only published novel, *Yonnondio* follows the Holbrook family in the mid 1920's as they struggle through extreme poverty.² Critics agree that it was Olsen's goal, not only with *Yonnondio* but throughout her literary career, to bring into focus through literature the lives of working-class people, especially women. Olsen sought to bring attention to women whose lives and aspirations were limited and silenced by their class and gender. In *Yonnondio*, for the oldest daughter of the family, Mazie, and her mother Anna, being poor and female work in tandem as disadvantages that compound one another.

Olsen continued to work towards her goal of expressing the lives of marginalized people through literature with her various short stories, as well as her anthology *Silences*, published four years after *Yonnondio*. A collection of lectures and essays by Olsen detailing what she considered to be causes of the silencing of creative or literary powers of women writers, as critic

¹ Various sources state specifically 1936 or 1937. According to Olsen's own afterward to *Yonnondio*, she discontinued work on the novel at a nonspecific time between these two years.

² Olsen defines the setting before the first chapter, stating "the opening of this book is the early 1920's" (Olsen 1). However, it is possible this is a typo, since the book is titled "from the Thirties", and Olsen describes in the afterward the social climate of the 1930's, stating that *Yonnondio* "bespeaks the consciousness and roots of that decade" (Olsen 195).

Corinna K. Lee describes, the book served to “establish “silences” and “circumstances” as central subjects for feminist literary criticism and literary history” (Lee 39). Therefore, Olsen’s enduring literary reputation is primarily built from her influence and work as a feminist writer and advocate in the atmosphere of second-wave feminism, and secondary from the political tradition and climate which Olsen was part of in her earlier career.

Considering this divide, *Yonnondio*’s delayed publication has caused considerable ramifications for the book’s critical reception. As Lee describes in her article “Documents of Proletarian Fiction: Tillie Olsen’s *Yonnondio*: from the Thirties”, both Olsen’s afterward to the book as well as her established literary career by the time it was published have caused *Yonnondio* to be received in a particular context intended by Olsen, framing it as “reconstructive” fiction. In *Yonnondio*’s afterward Olsen states that she recovered the 1930’s text and compiled the chapters without revision, which Lee claims marks the work as a document and places it within the genre of reconstructive fiction (which became more prominent in the 1970’s). Therefore, *Yonnondio*’s unfinished nature and fragmentary style are contributed by most critics to Olsen’s personal struggle to come to writing- much in the same way that she describes the limitations on women’s creative process in *Silences*. In addition to this, Lee describes that Olsen’s framing distances herself from the young writer of *Yonnondio* and her early career. Therefore, it is essential to consider Olsen’s earlier political ideology as the background from which *Yonnondio* was formed. Olsen’s entire literary career produced only a handful of published works, and many of them are her political articles from the early 1930’s. This includes articles such as “The Strike”, detailing Olsen’s involvement with the San Francisco general strike of 1934, and her resulting arrest (Lee 32). These articles and essays lean toward the genre of progressive journalism, a type of journalism that is highly biographical and aimed to tell the

writer's personal story. When Olsen began *Yonnonidio* at the age of 19, some sources state that it was "a proletariat novel based loosely on her own family" (Lee 33). Drawing from this basis of the working class people that she grew up with, Olsen developed the main characters of the novel into representations of the working class.

There is no question among critics that *Yonnonidio* is a tribute to and description of the hardships experienced by the working-class, and especially working-class women. However, that is not to say that Olsen ignores or leaves behind the working-class men represented in *Yonnonidio*. Olsen presents these men in a position that makes clear both their involvement in oppressive systems, as well as their ability to be sympathetic, nurturing, and sensitive people. It is Olsen's ability to create fully realistic and completely human characters that also enables her to describe the complicated positions of working-class people without vilifying or blaming them. While they may be a part of the very systems that oppress them, Olsen lays bare for the reader the hardships they face that force them into detrimental decisions or actions.

Beginning with their life in a Wyoming coal mining town, *Yonnonidio* follows the Holbrooks to a farm and then an urban neighborhood near a slaughterhouse, where Mazie's father, Jim, finds a job. As Lee describes "the Holbrooks are a working-class family caught in the capitalist machinery of the industrializing United States" (Lee 34). Because of her interrupted work, Olsen left *Yonnonidio* without a definitive ending. Whether the family will ever experience a sustainable improvement in their quality of life remains unclear, and as the novel progresses, Olsen's characters endure increasingly appalling conditions. Moving quickly from one industrial setting to another, the Holbrook's are caused further hardship as they continuously have to cope with unfamiliar surroundings. The novel is dominated by the industrial entities of the coal mine and the slaughterhouse. Providing only temporary reprieve from the harshness of these

environments, the Holbrook's short stay on the tenant farm is overtaken by the image and physical presence of the packing house in the third and final section of the novel. While *Yonnonidio* is focused on the aforementioned industrial settings, Olsen's critical commentary on industrialism is crucially formed with the portrayal of natural imagery and spaces.

Olsen use of natural imagery presents the exploitation of the earth by invasive industries as a mirror to the exploitation of the working class's bodies in a capitalist system, which reduces them to their physical function. Valued only for their physical contributions to society, Olsen indicates the limitations in such a structure, which eventually work to silence the assertion of individual identity and autonomy, especially for women. The described interaction between the natural and industrial is best represented through Mazie's character and her relationship with the natural world. Focusing on the sections of the narrative delivered from Mazie's perspective, it can be seen through a string of connected scenes that Olsen utilizes Mazie's intense and emotional connections with the natural world to illustrate not only the exploitation of Mazie and her mother's bodies, but also the deterioration of Mazie's ability to define or assert her own identity. Illustrating throughout the course of *Yonnonidio* how poverty acts oppressively on Mazie in ways specific to her gender, the oppressive systems that Mazie experiences diminish her sense of self.

In *Yonnonidio*, several characters including Mazie are clearly struggling to either gain or maintain a sense of selfness. Olsen uses the term "selfness" to describe the type of identity confirmation that many of her characters are seeking. Olsen uses this word specifically during a scene late in the novel, in lines where Anna's presence "spun a web, cocooned Mazie into happiness and intactness and selfness. Soft rose the bliss round hurt and fear and want and shame- the old worn fragile bliss, a new frail selfness bliss" (Olsen 146). In this passage the term

“selfness” indicates a feeling of comfortable confidence and security in one’s self. This sense of selfness is powerful and encompassing enough to eclipse, at least momentarily, despondent feelings of shame and fear.

Critic Michael Staub describes in his 1988 article “The Struggle for ‘Selfness’ through Speech in Olsen’s *Yonnonidio*: from the Thirties” the themes of speech and self-fulfillment, stating that in *Yonnonidio* “a theme emerges: that women and girls of the working class will never identify their own concerns at home or in the society at large, and will never be able to change their lives for the better, until they can create forums where their individual stories are heard, shared, and debated” (Staub 130). Staub further asserts that “this struggle for “selfness” was often nothing less than a struggle for survival” (Staub 131). Interpreting this selfness as essential, Staub goes on to explain that Mazie descends into “madness” by the final stages of the novel, which he states is largely a product of her identity confusion, caused by an inability to speak or be listened to by a sympathetic audience. While Staub interprets Olsen’s depiction of selfness throughout *Yonnonidio* as a struggle that specifically female characters experience directly in relation with their ability to speak and be heard, several other critics disagree and argue with Staub’s interpretation of selfness and his reading of the novel as a whole. This debate on the nature and function of Olsen’s idea of selfness therefore constitutes the largest point of contention within literary criticism about *Yonnonidio*.

Refuting Staub’s interpretation completely, critic Agnes Cardoni argues that “Staub’s reading is attractive, except it rests on the assumption that simply talking about their problems will somehow change women’s circumstance” (Cardoni 136). In addition to this, Cardoni challenges Staub’s interpretation of Mazie’s voice throughout the novel. While Staub states that Mazie’s voice “seems to disappear altogether” by the final stages of *Yonnonidio*, Cardoni insists

that the shift in perspective from Mazie to Anna actually indicates the merging of the mother and daughter's perspectives, and the resulting conjoined perspective. Cardoni adds that "Staub's assumptions seem to limit his ability to read Tillie Olsen's rich and multivoiced text", and that "because he assumes a unity of voice and perspective throughout, Staub misreads the novel" (Cardoni 140).

Offering another view on the shifting between perspectives, Elaine Neil Orr states in her book *Tillie Olsen and a Feminist Spiritual Vision* that "Mazie. . . offers a shaping consciousness at the beginning of the story. As the novel develops, however, the perspective becomes more and more that of the mother, Anna", and also adds that "the development of girl-to-woman consciousness in the novel reflects the concurrent change in perspective in the writer's own life" (Orr 51-52). Therefore, while Cardoni perceives a conjoining of mother and daughter's perspectives, Orr describes a notable shift from Mazie to Anna, who's consciousness then comes to dominate the novel. Orr's description is accurate based on the amount of content presented from either Anna or Mazie's points of view, while the joint perspective that Cardoni describes actually comes into being at one key point. This is the aforementioned scene in which Olsen actually uses the term selfness, a scene that is a singular point in which Mazie and Anna both experience a fleeting but intact moment of wholeness and joyful selfness. However, the conjoined mother-daughter perspective that Cardoni describes only occurs in this singular instance, and not throughout the final section of *Yonnondio*.

While Staub, Cardoni, and other critics take differing stances on Olsen's idea of selfness, what Orr presents with unique insightfulness is either the suppression or experience of one's "true self" (Orr 59). Orr describes how Anna is often "alienated from her true self" and that "by being forced into an existence of extreme poverty and impossible work demands, Anna loses her

authentic being” (Orr 61-62). Orr goes on to further develop the concept of Olsen’s characters finding a strong sense of individual self that is most authentic when it can be both separate from others and with them, emotionally distinct from one another but uplifted by each other. In this instance, Orr explains, Olsen presents a circumstance in which one can be responsible or supportive to others’ needs without sacrificing one’s own well-being in the process. Orr’s description of the “true self” in Anna that is oppressed by extreme poverty and unachievable societal expectations can easily be applied to Mazie’s character as well, indicating the aspects of poverty that will act on Mazie to limit her individuality in a way that Anna has already experienced.

Considering these complexities of Olsen’s portrayal of individuality, this paper will use the term “selfness” to describe only the formation and concept of individual identity, which is often solidified by an assertion of individual autonomy and control. Jim, Anna, and Mazie all struggle to cope with lack of control over their situation in a world where their lives and choices are constrained in many ways. Often being forced to react to the immediate circumstance of illness or birth, Olsen’s characters rarely get to make their own choices.

In conjunction with her portrayal of individuality, it is also important to note briefly Olsen’s depiction of class consciousness. Olsen indicates at several points in *Yonnondio* that workers will only be able to advocate for their own rights if they unionize, and come together on a massive scale. While this is the only solution that Olsen presents in *Yonnondio* which may lead to a real, revolutionary change in the systems that oppress the Holbrooks, Olsen also indicates the difficulties of developing such a unified class consciousness. People such as Jim’s young coworker Tracy, who still “believed the bull about freedom of opportunity and . . . rugged individualism and something about a pursuit of happiness” (Olsen 89). Still caught in the

promise of the American dream that Jim has become disillusioned with, Tracy leaves his job pridefully, demanding better conditions and assuming that he may find another job easily, one that will offer better pay and less difficult work. In addition to this, Olsen repeatedly gives examples of ways that Jim's jobs (industrial jobs in a capitalist society) promote competition between employees, creating benefits for workers who divide and compete with one another. For example, when one of Jim's supervisors tells him "there's plenty good concrete men and muckers with their tongues hangin out for a job. You'll make ten or you're out", referring to an impossible quota (Olsen 87). This diminishes any feelings of mutuality between workers. Therefore, Olsen presents the need for a unified class consciousness to develop, while simultaneously illustrating the obstacles preventing it from doing so. What is relevant about this depiction of class consciousness to the argument of this paper is that Olsen indicates the need for individuality within this class consciousness. Without the type of distinct but supportive individualism that is found in Olsen's depiction of true selfness (as Orr explains), Olsen implies that working-class people will not be able to collectively come together in an effective way. Therefore, the ability of secure and viable selfness to develop is necessary before a collective class consciousness can truly be useful in the struggle for improved working conditions.

Now that the complexities and critical discourse over Olsen's idea of selfness and individual identity have been addressed, Mazie's own struggle to develop a sense of self, as represented through her relationship with the natural world, can be explored.

Mazie is only six years old when *Yonnonidio* begins, and around eight at the end of Olsen's unfinished text. However, Mazie is already entering into the realm of early adolescence and experiencing the psychological turmoil of discerning her own place in the world, while still developing an understanding of how the world works. This is exemplified early in the novel by

Mazie's ignorance of what many words mean, although she exhibits a constant curiosity and desire to learn their meanings, often asking Anna. In fact, Mazie is often struggling to comprehend adults' actions or events that she cannot understand yet. Just like words she doesn't know the meaning of, Mazie is forced to confront these truths before she is ready, causing her distress and withdrawal. In the novel's first few pages, she lies outside on the ground- a behavior she repeats several times throughout the course of *Yonnondio*. Helping her to cope with stressful and often traumatic experiences, this behavior becomes habitual and also a way for Mazie to withdraw further, through escape. Focusing on the scenes throughout *Yonnondio* where Mazie is shown repeating this behavior, and through her internal dialogue and her relationship to nature throughout these scenes, they may be viewed as a connected thread throughout the novel, which can then serve to illustrate a progressive deterioration of Mazie's ability to define her own identity.

During the first passage in which Mazie lies on the ground, Olsen writes "Mazie lay under the hot Wyoming sun, between the outhouse and the garbage dump. There was no other place for Mazie to lie, for the one patch of green in the yard was between these two spots. From the ground rose a nauseating smell. Food had been rotting in the garbage piles for years. Mazie pushed her mind hard against things half known, not known. "I am Mazie Holbrook," she said softly. "I am a-knowen things. I can diaper a baby. . .A phrase trembled into her mind, "Bowels of earth." She shuddered. It was mysterious and terrible to her. . ."It means the mine. Bowels is the stummy. Earth is a stummy and mebbe she ets the men that come down. . . Night be comen and everything becomes like under the ground. . . Bowels of earth they put him in. Callin it dead. Mebbe it's for coal, more coal. That's one thing I'm not a-knowen. Day comes and night comes and the whistle blows and payday comes". (Olsen 4-6)

In this passage Mazie is attempting to orient herself in the world and place within this structure what she has seen in her every-day life. By stating “I am Mazie Holbrook” and listing the things she knows how to do, Mazie is attempting to define her own role to herself. Already, this role is primarily defined by domestic chores, like diapering a baby, that are placed on her based on her gender. Throughout the course of *Yonnondio*, Mazie’s role is constantly defined by her gender. This becomes a dominant factor in determining her identity or her place in the world. Still, stating these concrete facts and tasks she can complete gives Mazie some self- confidence as well as context through her physical experience, which informs the structure of her world. Speaking aloud to herself, mazie is beginning to solidify a definition of her own identity. By listing events of her daily life, such as the natural rotation of night and day, mazie is also attempting to create a structure of normal life.

It becomes apparent, however, that Mazie is still grasping at a clear definition of her own identity because there are many things she is not yet “a-knowen” about the world. Every morning she is awakened by the coal mine’s whistle, which could indicate either a deadly accident or just the beginning of her fathers’ work day. Like this ambiguous noise, Mazie’s world is full of uncertainty. By listing the definite and unchanging elements of her days, Mazie attempts to create stability and a secure framework through which she can understand her own identity as well as how she fits into the world around her.

After this initial laying scene is delivered to the reader soon after the story’s introduction, Mazie endures a disturbing experience in which one of her fathers’ coworkers at the mine kidnaps her and attempts to throw her into the mine shaft in his delusional haze. While she escapes physically unharmed, the psychological trauma to Mazie is vast, and incomprehensible to her parents. Mazie’s previously established habit of lying in the grass, while already a form of

escapism from the harsh realities of life, becomes increasingly more so as she grapples with unsettling memories of the incident and tries to suppress them.

While Mazie's habitual action of lying on the ground is from then on primarily used as an attempt to comfort herself after traumatic experiences, as already described this pattern of behavior has multiple functions for Mazie, including when she is attempting to form or solidify a concept of her own sense of self. Alone or with her siblings in a natural space, this is the singular place where Mazie feels safe to explore her own thoughts, even though she is often trying to suppress her uncomfortable ones. Olsen repeatedly emphasizes the limited and diminishing availability of these spaces to Mazie- literally wedged in beside garbage dumps and outhouses, the limited area of these natural spaces by the repulsive byproducts of human industry represents the encroaching presence of industrialism on natural spaces.

As critic Maura Faulkner states, by the early 1990's there were only two book-length critical sources published on Olsen that included criticism of *Yonnonidio* (Faulkner 4). One of these books was *Tillie Olsen*, by Mickey Perlman and Abby H. P. Werlock. While Perlman and Werlock give Olsen immense credit for the characters she creates who refuse to submit to their struggles, Perlman and Werlock rely too heavily on input from outside of Olsen's text itself, and actually misread it at several key points, causing them to miss one of Olsen's overarching ideas.

First and foremost, Perlman and Werlock fail to understand the significance of the Holbrook's struggle to make a living during the second section of the novel, when they leave the coal mine behind to live on a farm. Over the course of a year, this time is the most positive and hopeful in all of *Yonnonidio*. However, this short span of prosperity ends quickly when Jim finds out that he still owes money to the landowners despite a year of backbreaking work. Perlman and Werlock describe the harshness of the land, failing to realize that it is the system of land

ownership which makes it impossible once again for the Holbrook's to make ends meet. To not catch this detail causes Perlman and Werlock to blame the natural conditions and miss Olsen's overall point that labor systems imposed by people are the factor causing detrimental ramifications for the Holbrooks. Related to this, Perlman and Werlock discuss Mazie lying between the garbage dump and the outhouse to illustrate their point that "Anna and Mazie are trapped too, by the actual physical spaces that define the novel" (Perlman and Werlock 39). While this point is salient and an important observation to make, they fail to acknowledge or further explain the significance of Mazie being stuck between these two spaces. As previously explained, these two spaces are significantly representations of the waste of man-made industry, which are encroaching on the natural, or "actual physical spaces" of the novel.

Olsen describes Mazie's habit once more before the Holbrook's move to the tenant farm. Beginning with natural imagery, Olsen writes "above colors were gathering in the sky. Sunset colors, though it was early afternoon. Mazie remembered the colors in the culm and shuddered" (Olsen 25). This is a clear example of the intruding presence of Mazie's memory of the traumatic incident at the mine, as the colors of the sky remind her of the colors of the mine's culm. But here Mazie's attempts at avoidance are successful, as her laying behavior initially functions well to keep her memories of the incident at bay. As Olsen describes, when Mazie "lay down in the rustling autumn leaves, one hand over her eyes, shielding them from what she did not know. . . the tightness that had been around her heart slackened, eased, was no more" (Olsen 25). This natural space comforts Mazie's unsettled internal thoughts.

Once the Holbrooks move to the tenant farm, Mazie's habit begins to take on considerably darker tones, especially in the second of two such scenes. From here on, Mazie's internal stream of consciousness throughout the rest of the laying scenes indicates that this

behavior eventually fails completely to provide her with either comfort or a secure sense of selfness. Mirroring the increasingly restricted natural space in the novel, Olsen illustrates the restricted ability that Mazie has to either explore or define her own sense of self.

During the first of the two scenes on the farm, Olsen in a single but substantial line describes Mazie's actions. She writes "once, hungry, degraded, after a beating from Anna for some mischief, Mazie lay by the roadside, bedded in the clover, belly down, feeling the earth push back against her, feeling the patterns of clover smell twine into her nostrils till she was drugged with the scent" (Olsen 45).

This line is indicative not only of the enticing comfort, even "drugged" quality that the clover induces in Mazie, but also the use of smell that Olsen uses repeatedly to represent the opposing entities of natural spaces and invasive industries. In the third section of the novel, the nauseating smell from the slaughterhouse is pervasive and often intruding on natural spaces, such as Anna's back yard. Described with the same invasive qualities that Olsen portrays coal dust with in the first section of the novel, the packing house smell represents the invading presence of industrial images throughout the course of *Yonnondio*. In the line above, Olsen employs the smell of clover before the packing house smell ever enters the nose or mind of Mazie. Thus, with natural smells coming first, Olsen creates a sense of invasion by the dominating presence of the packing house scent.

While there is still a comfort offered in the first scene where Mazie lies down while the Holbrooks are living at the farm, the second time she does so Mazie experiences drastically different results. Olsen sets the scene by describing Mazie and her younger brother Will's ascent into a high wooded area above the farmland. Olsen then describes, "restless, Mazie pressed herself into the earth, but the soft dankness brought a faint remembrance of a face like jelly

pushed against hers” (Olsen 60). Suddenly, Mazie’s habitual coping strategy doesn’t help her cope at all, but brings up, as she enters a retrospective state of openness to her own thoughts that the earth provides her with, the startling image of the face of the man who tried to throw her into the mine. Olsen continues the scene with writing “shuddering, she got up again. . .Ugly and ugly the earth. Patches of soiled snow oozing away, leaving the ground like great dirty sores between, scabs of old leaves that like a bruise hid the violets underneath” (Olsen 60-61). Now Mazie sees only an ugly and putrid vision of the natural elements around her. “Trees, fat with oily buds, and the swollen breasts of prairie. Ugly. She turned her eyes to the sky for oblivion, but it was bellies, black and corpse gray, pushing out baggier and baggier, cloud belly on cloud belly till at the zenith they pushed vast and swollen. Her mother. Night, sweating bodies. The blood and pain of birth” (Olsen 60-61)

In this scene, unlike the other instances where Mazie attempts to find comfort by pressing herself against the earth, her attempt at soothing herself fails. Instead, a traumatic memory surfaces of the violent incident with at the coal mine. This scene foreshadows her mother’s painful labor the next night, giving the reader a deeper understanding of Mazie’s fear and discomfort during the birth. Overall, this scene ties together Mazie’s previous search for comfort and self- placement with Olsen’s reoccurring motif of the rotting or spoiling of what was once healthy. Giving up on her once comforting behavior, when Mazie stands she is absorbed with an ugly and disturbing view of the earth, as she is also accosted by unsettling images of her mother, bodies, and birth. This connection between the residual trauma and Mazie’s pregnant mother ties together Mazie’s discomfort with a sense of grotesque fertility. Like the “trees, fat with oily buds”, and the “swollen breasts of the prairie”, Mazie feels an intense aversion to the idea of birth or pregnancy (Olsen 61). During the times that Anna experiences a miscarriage or gives

birth, Mazie becomes extremely upset. Mazie's distress in this situation indicates the reality of her innocence- even though her parents both expect her to help Anna, she doesn't yet understand the process of birth, miscarriage, or sex. Unable to prevent, stop, or understand the source of Anna's pain, Mazie is only caused more distress because she doesn't fully comprehend what's happening. In her confusion, Mazie tries to alleviate her own disturbed thoughts through escapism or comfort. As is evident in this scene, however, Mazie can no longer escape these thoughts or find a source of comfort from natural spaces.

At this point Mazie no longer feels the freedom or ability to assert her own identity even within the safety of a natural space. No longer forming statements like her previous "I am Mazie Holbrook", she is instead preoccupied with an ugly vision of her surroundings. Additionally, as Mazie is consumed with this hideous vision, the clear deterioration of her ability to define her own situation is further indicative of the reduction of individuals in a capitalist society to their physical function or bodily value. As Mazie begins to understand the requirements placed on her because of her gender, such as being Anna's nurse during birth, or tasks of mothering that Anna has no time or energy to complete, Mazie develops an intense and visceral aversion to her mother's multiple pregnancies throughout *Yonnondio*. At a very young age Mazie is expected to take on mothering duties that Anna is too busy or exhausted to do. These include cleaning, caring for the baby Bess or her younger brothers, or cooking dinner. The expectation that Mazie complete this work while her brothers do not indicates the separation and distinction that occurs even in childhood between women's and men's work. As Mazie begins to take on this work even in early childhood, the trajectory of Anna's life and Anna's primary role as a mother represents the roles that Mazie is likely going to fall into. Mazie's aversion to Anna's pregnancies occurs not only because she struggles to understand the process of pregnancy and birth, but also because

the commodification of Anna's body as a reproductive system represents what could happen to Mazie in the future, while causing mother and daughter physical and psychological pain. Anna becomes a clear example throughout *Yonnondio* of the ways in which Mazie's body will likely be exploited. Marriage, childbirth, and domestic work all take a toll on Anna's body and her well-being.

Stressing the physical depletion that mothering exerts on Anna, in *Yonnondio* Olsen provides the reader with a progressive representation of motherhood. Olsen contrasts the consuming and constrictive aspects of motherhood with Anna's unwavering determination to provide her children with a life better than her own. Negating the idea that mothering is an innate ability or instinct possessed by women, Olsen encourages her reader to be sympathetic to Anna even when she fails to succeed at being a good mother. As the closest person to Mazie, Anna has a profound impact on her development. In many ways Anna's influence is well-intentioned but still detrimental to Mazie.

While the reader may initially blame Anna for physically beating and verbally abusing Mazie, Olsen subtly encourages the reader to develop sympathy for Anna, as she personifies the effects of years and years of struggle and oppression, which have still failed to subdue her hope for a better future. Despite the initial blame that a reader may place on Anna for abusing her children, after further examination Anna's actions are an expression of the combined societal pressures and compiled hardships that Anna has to endure. Frustrated by her inability to care properly for her children or keep her home clean, and damaged herself by her husband's physical violence toward her, Anna resorts to verbal and physical violence. Overall, Olsen indicates that although Anna's direct actions are often damaging to her children, to place blame on her directly would be a further continuation of the systems and forces causing Anna's actions.

While several critics emphasize the importance of the walk scene, most glaze over specifically the significance of the connection to nature for Mazie. While Cardoni states that “certainly Mazie’s experience of selfness is a function of her mothers’ touch. . .combined with the life from the earth”, Cardoni focuses on Mazie’s relationship with her mother and does not give the second component of this equation enough attention (Cardoni 123). Focusing on Mazie and Anna’s connection and experience of joyful self-fulfillment, which is definitely an essential focus of the scene, critics fail to give attention to Olsen’s more subtle description of Mazie’s connection to nature. As evident throughout the previous ‘laying’ scenes, when considered as a string of events throughout *Yonnondio*, they illustrate how Mazie’s relationship with the natural world develops. What is for Mazie a comforting space that allows her to delve into her own mind or begin to formulate her own concept of individual identity, quickly loses any element of comfort as natural spaces within the novel become constricted by the invading presence of industrialization. As her family becomes increasingly entrenched and ensconced within industrial labor systems, Mazie develops a longing for these natural spaces that she has lost access to. The walk she takes with Anna is the only scene the reader sees in which Mazie is (temporarily) reunited with nature in a way that she has not experienced since the family’s time on the farm. After leaving the farm Mazie’s separation and detachment from natural spaces not only mirrors her increasing psychological distress, but is also indicative of the diminishing space available to her.

Anna suffers from the same lack of personal space that Mazie does. Anna, however, experiences the lack of space in a more severe way that Mazie has yet to develop. While Jim has the freedom to leave the house for work, Anna’s labor lies within the walls of her house, which gives her intense feelings of confinement and suffocation in the third stage of the novel. When

the weather allows it, Anna takes her work into the yard, where she feels less confined. “Inside suffocated her (outside too when there was packing-house stench) but a need was in her to be out under a boundless sky, in unconfined air” (Olsen 133). As described earlier, the reference to the smell of the packing house (slaughterhouse) is significant- it implies that Anna’s enjoyment of the outdoors is ruined not only on a surface level by the unappealing smell of the packing house, but also in a symbolic way, the packing house smell representing the intruding presence of industrialism that permeates Anna’s life as well as the natural spaces that she enjoys. While Anna’s motivation in this scene was primarily her seeking to get out of the stuffy, dirty house, this scene as well as Anna’s transformation during the walk indicate that she feels a sense of tranquility and soothing effect from natural spaces that is similar to the comfort that Mazie experiences.

While Mazie experiences a deterioration of her ability to assert her own individuality in tandem with the impending expectations that she will take on the same roles of mothering that Anna upholds, Olsen presents in this singular scene the facilitation of a secure feeling of individuality by natural spaces. As Mazie grows older, she seems to become less and less able to exert a sense of self, especially because of the impending expectations associated with being a woman. In other words, readers understand that Mazie is primed to take Anna’s role as mother and caregiver once she reaches adulthood. Yet despite Mazie’s diminishing ability to assert her own individuality, Olsen highlights a moment when Mazie does seem able to assert a sense of self, and this scene takes place almost exclusively in natural--not industrial--spaces. In the final chapters of *Yonnondio*, Olsen delivers a scene in which Anna and Mazie both experience a joyful sense of security in their own individuality, largely brought on by their surroundings during a walk to gather dandelion leaves. As Cardoni is eager to point out, while Anna is singing, Mazie

does not speak throughout this passage, which further refutes Staub's assertion that selfness is mainly contingent on the ability of Olsen's characters to speak. Instead, Cardoni asserts that the selfness developed in this walk scene is developed with a mutuality and carefully balanced interdependence exhibited by both Anna and Mazie. Creating what Cardoni calls a "conjoined perspective" of mother and daughter, Mazie accepts her mother's care, which Anna can finally give without pain or sacrifice. Therefore, this scene further disproves Staub's argument, which is largely based on the description of Mazie's descent into madness and her isolation from all other characters.

Watching Anna, Mazie sees "that look was on her mother's face again, her eyes so shining and remote"(Olsen 123). Mazie at first feels fear when she watches Anna experience a secure selfness that is separated and remote from her identity as Mazie's mother. Following this fear, Mazie feels a strong sense of security that is unparalleled in the rest of *Yonnondio*. As Anna begins to stroke her hair, Mazie feels "cocooned. . .into happiness and intactness and selfness. Soft wove the bliss round hurt and fear and want and shame. . .up from the grasses, from the earth, from the broad tree trunk at their back" (Olsen 123). With this fleeting moment Olsen suggests that a stable and secure sense of selfness, supported by the presence of comforting natural imagery, restores Mazie to a sense of intactness in her own body. Creating an image of strength and firm support literally rooted in the earth, Mazie sits supported by this tree at the end of the scene. Contrasting the moments when Anna feels constricted and trapped by literal physical settings (mainly the house in this section of the novel), the openness of this space is freeing.

Faulkner discusses the walk with reverence, stating "this scene is the glowing center of *Yonnondio*, its power reaches backward and forward through the gritty darkness of the story,

making poverty and fragmentation seem even more intolerable, simply because we have caught a glimpse of this rich unity.” While many critics discuss the sense of selfness and transformative individuality experienced by both Anna and Mazie in this scene, none give the full attention deserved by the influence of natural spaces. Cardoni comes close, stating “certainly Mazie’s experience of selfness is a function of her mother’s touch and soothing presence combined with the life from the earth”, however neither Cardoni nor other critics emphasize the power of this natural setting, or its significance in conjunction with the other descriptions of natural spaces within the novel. Olsen specifically describes the honeysuckle and Catalpa tree that Anna remembers from her childhood. Yet just as quickly as this feeling arrives, it is gone, as “the wind shifted, blew packing house” (Olsen 124). This moment of selfness is fleeting, as Anna and Mazie are overtaken once more by the dominating packing house.

Works Cited

Cardoni, Agnes Toloczko. *Women's Ethical Coming-of-age : Adolescent Female Characters In the Prose Fiction of Tillie Olsen*. Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1998. Print.

Faulkner, Mara. *Protest and possibility in the writing of Tillie Olsen.* University Press of Va.,

1993. *Book Review Digest Plus.* Web. 19 Apr. 2011.

<http://vnweb.hwwilsonweb.com.proxy.mcpl.lib.mo.us/hww/results/getResults.jhtml>

[_DARGS=/hww/results/results_common.jhtml.35](http://vnweb.hwwilsonweb.com.proxy.mcpl.lib.mo.us/hww/results/results_common.jhtml)

Lee, Corinna K. "Documents of proletarian fiction: Tillie Olsen's *Yonnonidio*: from the thirties."

Journal of Modern Literature, vol. 36, no. 4, 2013, p. 113+. *Literature Resource Center*,

<http://link.galegroup.com.proxy177.nclive.org/apps/doc/A345277579/LitRC?>

[u=ashv45734&sid=LitRC&xid=7ffd4d5b](http://link.galegroup.com.proxy177.nclive.org/apps/doc/A345277579/LitRC?u=ashv45734&sid=LitRC&xid=7ffd4d5b). Accessed 4 May 2018.

Olsen, Tillie. *Yonnonidio : From the Thirties*. London: Virago, 1980. Print.

Pearlman, Mickey, and Werlock, Abby H. P. *Tillie Olsen*. Boston: G. K. Hall, Twayne

Publishers, 1991. Print.

Staub, Michael. "The Struggle for 'Selfness' through Speech in Olsen's *Yonnonidio: From the*

Thirties." *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, edited by Jeffrey W. Hunter and Deborah A.

Schmitt, vol. 114, Gale, 1999. *Literature Resource Center*. Accessed 18 Nov. 2017.

Originally published in *Studies in American Fiction*, vol. 16, no. 2, Autumn 1988,

pp. 131-139.

Orr, Elaine N. *Tillie Olsen and a Feminist Spiritual Vision*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1987. Print.