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Unreconciled Contradictions: Autonomy, Ideology, and the Possibility of Progress in Tillie Olsen's "Tell Me a Riddle"

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Unreconciled Contradictions: Autonomy, Ideology, and the Possibility of Progress in Tillie

Olsen's "Tell Me a Riddle"

Rachel Leigh Curtis

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

GRAND VALLEY STATE UNIVERSITY

In

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

Masters

English Literature

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DEDICATION

To my mother, who taught me to hierarchize my life pursuits; and to Peter, who encourages and enables me to do so.

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PREFACE

Appreciation and awe for Tillie Olsen's "Tell Me a Riddle" initiated this project, but exploration of Olsen's life and work revealed realities that I could not easily reconcile with her overarching philosophical commitments. Far from maligning Olsen, my intent has been to further understand the constraints that prevented the exercising of her full capacity. The poignancy of her few texts coupled with years of silence stand as evidence of a great tragedy: an inability to maximize time and capacity for writing. Such realities force consideration of causes.

ABSTRACT

Tillie Olsen's most piercing and poignant text, "Tell Me a Riddle," depicts inescapable circumstances as thwarting all avenues of meaningful pursuit for Eva, its aging protagonist. Throughout her work and philosophy, Olsen continually emphasized the power of external constraints, and in this lies her powerful legacy. Her texts outline tragic realities, drawing attention to those on the fringe of society. Regardless of successes and opportunities, she considered herself similarly stifled and downtrodden. In "Tell Me a Riddle," she framed Eva's plight in a way that resembles her own perception of herself, but despite her identification with Eva, her situation differed greatly from that of her fictional character. Olsen demonstrated greater autonomy than Eva, engaging in radical action throughout her life. Regardless of Olsen's superior ability to pursue meaningful activity, she experienced disillusionment and an inability to achieve personal fulfillment, a reality that does mirror Eva's.

Failing to consider internal constraints, Olsen consistently cited external constraints as the cause of her struggles. While Eva suffers from the stultifying effects of forces outside her control, such as economic hardship, patriarchal oppression, and terminal illness, Olsen's own ideological commitments seem to have had considerable impact on her life trajectory, including her chronic inability to write and the accompanying discontent that characterized much of her life. Unexamined commitments entangled, restricting Olsen's life trajectory, and her ignorance of such realities disallowed positive counteraction. Although she failed to identify the effects of internal constraints, posit a solution, or provide an example of a woman exercising her autonomy in productive ways, "Tell Me a Riddle" does provide a portrait of hope. Eva's granddaughter, Jeannie, exhibits potentiality rather than actuality, yet her actions suggest the possibility of progress.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The significance of Tillie Olsen's life and work remains immeasurable yet immense. Born in 1912 in Omaha, Nebraska, Olsen developed interest in both literature and politics at a young age. From her parents' stories of poverty and defiance in turn-of-the-century Russia, she gained an early awareness of oppression and revolt. Her literary talents surfaced quickly as well, manifesting themselves in thoughtful diaries, clever satire, and expressive poetry.

Olsen first received affirmation of her writing ability as editor of the humor column in her high school newspaper. Later, she engaged her talents for the Young Communist League (YCL) and then for the Communist Party of the United States of America (CP-USA). In addition to being intensely political, her texts demonstrate significant artistic genius. After Olsen submitted "I Stand Here Ironing" as an assignment to Arthur Foff, a professor at San Francisco State University, he wrote in the margin of the text, "This is a magnificent sentence. No writing ever gets much better than this" (TOP 2.8). In his comments at the end of the story, he wrote, "There is absolutely no doubt in my mind that you possess a fresh, sometimes fierce, and authentic talent" (TOP 2.8). Foff had a hard time classifying her style, yet he was aware of her skill. Despite her tendency to deviate from traditional literary rules, she had a fascinating ability to capture emotion and experience and to convey them poignantly to her readers. Praise for Olsen's unique talent has continued throughout the decades. A 2007 obituary from *The Times* of London notes that "Tell Me a Riddle" is "a saga in miniature. . . which will endure, finely poised between poetry and realism" ("Tillie Olsen"). Olsen's frequently anthologized work continues to find an audience, which is a testament to its relevance and reward.

Olsen possessed deep passion for the cause of unrepresented and underrepresented people, and her texts and actions demonstrate a desire to raise awareness for those on the fringe of society. Mara Faulkner writes that Olsen's fiction "saves from forgetfulness the lives and communal histories of people still outside the visual field of most American readers, writers, and scholars" (1). Olsen found her subject matter in the everyday lives of the working class. As Mickey Pearlman and Abby Werlock note, she has

. . . forced us to pay attention to the influence of economic circumstance and social class; the meaning of limited time, money, energy, and space on the productivity of women; the nature and pain of imposed silence; and the often debilitating effects of "otherness" in a society that equates difference with disability, sameness with safety. (ix)

The issues Olsen confronts—race, class, and gender inequality—continue to be relevant today.

Olsen often revealed faith in the potential of humanity. After a lecture, she once espoused the conviction that, "What the world has given to us doesn't have to stay as it is because we are capable and have changed it. . . . It's not unremittingly grim to know that we haven't changed enough things yet. . . . I have a lot of belief in us" (2). Consistent with her passion for social justice, Olsen's texts are not merely forays into oppressive realities; instead, they "gather around themselves a circle of witnesses, a community whose members are called to acknowledge responsibility, struggle against futility, and sustain each other in the struggle" (Faulkner 108). Her literature invites action toward the rectification of injustices.

Olsen's earliest work does not contain social themes, yet after her conversion to Communism, she integrated politics and writing. During her early years with the CP-USA, she produced a variety of political material, including plays and pamphlets with overt agendas. As she grew older, her work became more nuanced. Her early notable compositions, such as "I Want You Women Up North to Know" and the unfinished *Yonnondio*, her first attempt at a novel, maintain strict adherence to the literary theory of the Left, but they show progress in her ability to achieve artistry without sacrificing social consciousness. Her later works, the four stories of *Tell Me a Riddle* and the essay collection *Silences*, show the persistence of political philosophies that inarguably grew from her time of intense commitment to party dictates. As her crowning achievement, *Tell Me a Riddle* is a poignant exploration of human nature and the complexity of life. In it, Olsen avoids simplistic didacticism, which elevates the level of artistry, yet social issues remain at the center of each story.

After the period of McCarthyism, Olsen aligned herself with the feminist movement. She taught at various institutions, lectured throughout the country, and worked to resurrect various texts that deserve a place in the American literary tradition. During this time, as with her earlier prioritizing of party activity, Olsen's written output suffered. Unable to produce in a timely manner that would provide continued economic support, she turned fully to teaching and lecturing as her primary sources of income, and these commitments thus further impeded her ability to write.

Olsen's various unfulfilled writing contracts—abandoned despite generous advances—create questions regarding her effectuality as a writer. Truly, "the fragmentary quality of her sparse output and the unexplained fallow periods in her writing life challenge interpretation"

(Pearlman, Werlock ix-x). Olsen's sparse output remains a controversial subject, and many reviewers viewed Olsen's final text, *Silences*, as an apologia for years of her own silence.

While many critics comment on her small output, few are willing to question her reasons for producing so little. Olsen claimed that external limitations were to blame, and she framed her ability to produce anything as exemplary. In her role as overcomer, she presented herself as a positive example to other women, shirking responsibility for failing to maximize her many uncommon opportunities. Book contracts and fellowships recurrently allowed her the financial means to produce, and although she wrote several works of significance, she ultimately disappointed both herself and those who provided monetary assistance. Only in her private writings does she acknowledge the possibility of personal responsibility. Publicly, she labored to perpetuate and protect an image of triumph amidst hardship. Preoccupation with reputation often led her to fabricate or omit details, and her actions were largely effective, as admiring critics often ignore the contradictions in her life—as well as those in her texts. A large portion of Olsen scholarship shies away from objective analysis and the confrontation of discrepancies. Instead, “much of the extant criticism is so adulatory that it impedes rather than enhances a straightforward understanding and appreciation of her work” (Pearlman, Werlock ix-x). Perhaps Olsen's laudable intentions have led devotees to view the contradictions as threatening to her potential impact, as if they somehow undercut the overarching purpose of her work. This then may partially account for the consistent reticence within Olsen scholarship to challenge solely flattering evaluations. Regardless of the reasons, critical responses that disregard difficulties rather than provide divergent explanations ignore the opportunity to engage in meaningful and necessary analysis.

Despite the relevance of her subject matter, the artistry of her form and language, and the progressive nature of her philosophies, Olsen's life and texts have not received adequate scholarly attention. Rather than acknowledging that philosophical shifts would naturally appear in works written at various stages of life, most critics attempt to find philosophical coherence by interpreting each major work in the context of the others. For instance, Faulkner's *Protest and Possibility in the Writing of Tillie Olsen* provides an engaging and evocative analysis; however, Faulkner synthesizes themes in multiple texts, thereby creating an increased sense of constancy. Such studies, while valuable, fail to acknowledge the integrity of each individual work—the fact that each demonstrates a particular purpose grown out of a particular time. Instead, critics seem intent on smoothing over various contradictions. The contradictions are, nevertheless, necessary and fruitful areas of exploration.

In addition to giving due attention to differences, it is important to note that Olsen's life provides an inescapable subtext to her published work. While her written life demonstrates long bouts of silence, her public life speaks multitudes. Even when she was not writing, she consistently engaged in social activity. Consequently, her legacy cannot be conflated with her mere body of texts, for although her texts are powerful, she “is known and admired much more because of what she represents than because of what she has written” (Pearlman, Werlock ix-x). Her activity informs her writing. Each forgotten text she helped to reissue and each lecture she gave increased the depth and complexity of her overall impact on humanity. Her legacy and reputation exceeds that which is contained in her published texts, and the texts themselves gain a depth of meaning when interpreted in light of her peripheral activities.

As a result, the text of her life demands to be read as well. Panthea Reid's 2010 biography, *Tillie Olsen: One Woman, Many Riddles*, offers an in-depth look at Olsen's life,

achieving a level of objectivity lacking in previous scholarship. Prior to Reid's text, a largely idealized version of Olsen's life comprised this inescapable subtext, and the known aspects of Olsen's life led largely to uncompromising adulation. Olsen's work undeniably deserves praise, but as Reid so aptly articulates, "we honor [her] legacy by understanding facts rather than perpetuating falsities" (337). The details of Olsen's life reveal her humanity. Falsely pedestaling her only creates a distance that inevitably disallows productive interchange.

Another reason for further scholarship is that up until shortly before her death in 2007, Olsen had been active in the formation of much of the scholarly criticism on her own texts and life. Her willingness to provide information and a general lack of verified facts rendered her the main authority regarding her history.¹ For instance, Deborah Rosenfelt allowed Olsen to comment on her article "From the Thirties: Tillie Olsen and the Radical Tradition," a text which "has provided the blueprint for all subsequent biographical scholarship on Olsen," according to literary critic Myles Weber (18). Jules Chametzky calls it, "the best single essay on Olsen I know" (118). However, Rosenfelt incorporated many of Olsen's suggestions regarding content and emphasis. Such scholarship—where the author in question is intimately tied to the major scholarly output—is inevitably lacking in objectivity.² To complicate matters further, Olsen frequently fabricated various aspects of her life, thereby creating distorted, highly idealized portraits of herself as artist, activist, and mother. Her written personae thus seem to have infiltrated her life, for personal recollections often meandered from fact into fiction. Reid takes on the challenge of righting various misconceptions about the life of Olsen, but as a biographer, her purpose is not to trace the ramifications of such information. Instead, her text allows greater possibility for additional work.

Several authors have noted the need for further scholarship. Faulkner references the disparities between Olsen's philosophies, texts, and actions; however, Faulkner excuses herself from furthering the debate. In *Consuming Silences: How to Read Writers Who Don't Publish*, Weber notes the need for scholarly attention to be paid to Olsen's perpetuation of herself as a victim of circumstance. He presents an argument that rails against Olsen devotees who have not objectively approached Olsen and her work, but he does not draw further implications. He merely states that such work must be done. Consequently, further Olsen scholarship is needed for a multiplicity of reasons, rendering this an intensely fruitful area for future research.

Bolstered by ideological commitments, Olsen insisted on a strict dichotomy between the communal and the individual, elevating the former while denouncing the latter. As such, motherhood, activism, and artistry become complicated topics. In both "Tell Me a Riddle" and her life, she appears to conflate activism and artistry as communal, fulfilling tasks while depicting motherhood as a patriarchal prison, part of the individual sphere, which stifles the possibility of meaningful, public work. The dichotomy Olsen's work perpetuates has ramifications in regard to the merits of motherhood; however, it also affects her philosophies about artistry. Given the personal, private nature of composition, Olsen consistently subordinated writing to activism, thereby establishing—at least in practice—a hierarchy among activism, artistry, and motherhood. Her lifelong laments, however, testify to her deep longing to prioritize artistry. While Olsen's Communist roots led her to condemn the notion of an individual pursuing his or her own needs as selfish and bourgeois, her texts draw attention to individual plights, thereby confirming the importance of each individual reality.

Although Olsen's dichotomous view of the communal and the individual had a profound impact on her life, she failed to recognize the ways in which internalized rhetoric motivated

many of her actions and led to harmful consequences. In her lamentations over the various circumstances that inhibit artistic creation, she fails to acknowledge the presence of personal choice and the potential power of the will.

SCOPE AND PURPOSE

Far from decreasing the value of her work, the unreconciled contradictions offer fertile ground to explore the complex dynamics of autonomy and female fulfillment. In this thesis, I analyze Olsen's most prominent work, "Tell Me a Riddle," through the context of her own life, thereby exploring the notion of autonomy and the various tensions that arise in her depictions of circumstances and choice.³ Throughout her corpus of work, Olsen portrays individuals crushed by the weight of their circumstances, utterly unable to extricate themselves from the confines of their oppressive realities. Such is the case with Eva of "Tell Me a Riddle." Through both her texts and her verbal commentary, Olsen resolutely condemns the power of circumstances. Yet despite claims about the possibility of progress, her constant return to the difficulty of one's context hints at futility.

"Tell Me a Riddle" portrays inescapable circumstances as thwarting all avenues of meaningful pursuit for Eva, its aging protagonist. Stifled by years of motherhood amidst an exploitative patriarchal society, Eva refuses to relinquish her home—her private, personal sphere—despite her husband David's demands that they move to a cooperative facility. Eva's actions starkly contrast the many years in which her needs and desires have been superseded by the needs and desires of family. When David learns that Eva has terminal cancer, he hides the truth from her and urges her to undertake cross-country visits to their children—visits that too often awaken old hurts rather than provide joy. These trips become indicative of external pressures that have consistently forced Eva toward serving family to her own detriment. For Eva,

once a political activist and orator in early twentieth-century Russia, the circumstances of American motherhood have seemingly eradicated all remnants of her previous self. Yet her journey toward death brings opportunity for expression of dormant beliefs—beliefs that have been repressed but not relinquished. She retains a radical vision of collective humanity despite the social atrocities of the twentieth century. Her delirious, near-death mumblings include recitation of book passages, questions regarding the horror of human brutality, and reminiscences on the demands of motherhood and financial hardship. These mumblings unveil her inner reality: a reality that testifies to both her distortion by—and defiance of—oppression. While the text is poignant in its social critique, it achieves a level of artistry and aesthetic beauty that propels it above the status of a mere political statement, rendering it a multifaceted piece of American literature deserving of ongoing critical examination.

In the text, Olsen frames Eva's investment in patriarchal motherhood and her accompanying disillusionment as a result of forces outside her control. Eva, like so many of Olsen's other characters, is trapped within the confines of her circumstances. From the Depression-weary characters of *Yonnondio* to the lamenting mother in "I Stand Here Ironing," Olsen depicts her characters as battling against insurmountable odds. At the end of Eva's life, when her mind wanders to the parts of her existence long since repressed—activism and artistry—readers more fully understand the extent to which her personhood has been dying, as reflected in the disease that has been spreading undetected for years.

Olsen seemed to view her own life as similarly stifled by insurmountable external forces. Often citing motherhood and financial hardship as impediments to production, she consistently resisted any responsibility for the trajectory of her life. Despite various difficulties, her life was characterized by unlikely opportunity and radical action. Far from Eva's declaration, "Never

again to be forced to move to the rhythms of others,” Olsen often refused to subjugate her agenda to the needs or desires of her family (Olsen, “Tell” 37).

Although Olsen possessed greater autonomy than Eva, Olsen experienced a similar lack of fulfillment. Throughout their lives, and most poignantly at the end of their lives, both Eva and Olsen demonstrate the reality of a severed self. Olsen espoused that all notions of fulfillment stem from the pursuit of communal good rather than an individualistic preoccupation with one’s own situation; nevertheless, Olsen’s pursuit of communal activity left her disillusioned. Olsen, throughout her life, exhibited a deep unrest that most poignantly manifested itself in her laments about not being able to write that which she felt arose within her unfettered and demanding of existence. Despite Olsen’s explicit pursuit of the communal, she did not avoid the feelings of ineffectuality and discontent that Eva also experiences. Olsen depicts Eva as unfulfilled because she is unable to connect to larger humanity, yet Olsen remained similarly unfulfilled despite her determination to resist the stifling confines of family life. Regardless of the disparities between Eva and Olsen, their ultimate plight remains the same: neither finds satisfaction nor self-realization in her situation.

While Olsen inarguably experienced hardship, she consistently refused to acknowledge the effects that her own choices had on her life trajectory. Her public statements overwhelmingly blame circumstances. However, her private writings are revelatory. This thesis draws from the Tillie Olsen Papers (TOP), which are held at Stanford University. These papers contain a plethora of Olsen’s introspective commentary. Many passages reveal that Olsen recurrently assigned blame to herself, yet her confessions—frequently arising on typewritten drafts or scraps of paper—often transition into justification and consequent reframing that once again blames circumstances.

Throughout this thesis, I use the term *constraint* in reference to various oppressive powers. The Oxford English Dictionary gives two useful definitions: “the exercise of force to determine or confine action; coercion, compulsion” and “confinement, bound or fettered condition; restriction of liberty or of free action” (“Constraint”). I use *external constraints* to denote inhibitors which originate and perpetuate outside of the oppressed person’s control. Discriminatory laws, faulty government, societal pressure, economic hardship, and patriarchal oppression all arise in Olsen’s literature, and they appear as aspects of victimization over which the victims struggle in vain. *Internal constraints* refers to the ideological commitments that undergird one’s actions. Olsen’s seemingly unexamined adherence to Communist principles is one such example. However, all belief systems have the potential to result in followers who fail to examine the basic assumptions of their commitments and thereby willingly yet blindly engage in harmful action.⁴

Olsen’s inability to prioritize writing and her accompanying disillusionment appear largely due to internal constraints, her ideological commitments, rather than external constraints. Her overarching rhetoric endorses collectivism and villainizes individualism, yet through her depictions of unacknowledged people, she draws attention to the reality of personal needs, thereby inadvertently acknowledging the necessity of righting individual realities. Amidst her intense concern for others, she did not imagine manifestations of individual pursuit that would resist selfish exploitation and consequently enrich the collective whole. Thus, in many ways Olsen is both a victim of her environment and of her own volition. She posited circumstances as the major inhibitor of her engagement in meaningful pursuit, thereby failing to recognize the existence of personal choice. Olsen, nevertheless, consistently engaged in radical action, and her experience thereby affirms the existence of some degree of agency. As I shall demonstrate, many

of her ideological commitments largely contributed to the creation of the very circumstances she lamented.

Rather than argue the reprehensibility of Olsen's actions, as Weber has done, I desire to better understand the underlying reasons for Olsen's failure to comprehend the effectuality of her actions. I outline Olsen's emphasis on external constraints, explore her own perceptions of her life, and thereafter demonstrate the divergence between her perceptions and reality. The furtherance of Olsen's work—identifying and consequently opposing all that thwarts humanity—requires exploration of ideological commitments and the possibility of autonomy. In the last hundred years the women's movement has made great breakthroughs against various external limitations, and, at least superficially, contemporary America holds vastly more opportunity for women. Yet the various realities that are often cited as proof of women's independence—political equality, economic opportunity, and reproductive control—demonstrate changes to external inhibitors, rather than internal, ideological inhibitors. Ostensibly, women may have more options; however, philosophical limiters continue to abound, simultaneously blinding and crippling women from making positive choices.

While Olsen ultimately intended her texts to initiate social change, they do not portray concrete manifestations of progress. Nowhere do we see a positive example of a woman resisting the debilitating structures that surround her. Only Eva's granddaughter, Jeannie, emerges as a figure of hope; yet she is merely potentiality rather than actuality. Olsen's belief in activism supports the notion that genuine transformation can occur in a world of injustice, yet this contradiction—between the possibility of social change and what seems to be radical contextualism—adds to the complexity of her legacy.

After achieving an impressive level of success and influence, Olsen chose to focus on the external constraints that hinder production rather than the perseverance of her will and the ways in which she made positive social contributions. She highlighted the injury of having one's course dictated, thereby indirectly confirming the possibility or at least the ideal of autonomy.⁵ While this potentiality undergirds her claims, she either doesn't realize its existence or chooses not to engage it. The reason is irrelevant. Instead of pushing toward a future that breaks free of constraints, she consistently attempted to draw attention to everything she could not control. As such, she failed to postulate ways to further female empowerment and therefore create a societal atmosphere where Eva's reality—inescapable immolation by societal circumstances—is not inevitable. The notion of autonomy remains positive albeit indefinitely elusive. As an ideal, full autonomy is inarguably unattainable, yet that does not render progress impossible. Olsen's inability to recognize the possibility of her own agency remains a central problem, for rather than introspectively analyzing the commitments that undergirded her actions, she assigned blame to external circumstances, thereby excluding the possibility of transcending internal inhibitors. Through "Tell Me a Riddle," Olsen illuminates the reality of external constraints, and while she may have identified with the powerless Eva, Olsen's own life testifies to both the force of internal constraints and the need for future generations to undertake the task of avoiding ideological ensnarement.

NOTES

¹ Reid, in reference to her biographical research on Olsen, states "I soon discovered that, though she was marvelous, she was also devious. . . . She tried to guard her image against the facts I was discovering, an unexpected consequence of writing about a living author. Our relationship continued as a testy hide-and-seek game in which she tried to control, while I tried to uncover, evidence" (Reid, "Panthea").

² In 2000, Reid published “Tillie Olsen: Utterances on the Side of Life,” yet Reid believes that because Olsen “insisted” on editing the article, “it came off as hagiography, an idealization of her” (“Panthea”). Reid notably acknowledges the inherent weakness of scholarship shaped by Olsen, even her own, and while Reid sought to base her biographical work on fact rather than fiction, there is little criticism that exhibits similar dedication to accuracy.

³ To this point, I have used the term *autonomy* as a broad reference to a state of idealistic freedom. The Oxford English Dictionary gives the following general definition: “liberty to follow one's will; control over one's own affairs; freedom from external influence; personal independence” (“Autonomy”). In *Kantianism, Liberalism, and Feminism*, Carol Hay states that at the core of the ideal of autonomy is “the notion of the self-determining individual who has the right to author his or her own life free from the coercive influence of others” (15).

⁴ A strict distinction between external internal constraints is insupportable, as oppressive realities inevitably manifest themselves both externally and internally. However, for the purposes of this paper, I intend to use these terms—external constraints and internal constraints—dichotomously. Olsen herself seems to have largely identified oppressive circumstances as external rather than internal, and she consequently ignored the internal component. As demonstrated by her consistent political activism, her focus was largely on reforming the external manifestations of oppression.

⁵ The world's greatest philosophers have long debated the problems of autonomy and power. Michel Foucault, Immanuel Kant, Judith Butler, Jürgen Habermas, and Seyla Benhabib each add interesting nuances to the discussion. In *The Politics of Our Selves: Power, Autonomy, and Gender in Contemporary Critical Theory*, Amy Allen provides an overview of various philosophical positions and consequently attempts to justify the pursuit of autonomy despite poststructuralist difficulties regarding power and the self. In examining the philosophical positions of various philosophers, she attempts to bring cohesion where critics have historically found disparity. Throughout the text, the notion of autonomy remains an elevated concept, which although arguably unachievable—or at least fully unachievable—remains notable and strikingly positive. Thus, while the goal may remain forever conceptual, that reality does not presuppose the possibility of genuine progress.

As Allen reveals in her text, various philosophers posit the possibility of positive self-transformation. In Foucault's later writings, he refers to a “critical ontology of ourselves... conceived as an attitude, an ethos, a philosophical life in which the critique of what we are is at one and the same time the historical analysis of the limits that are imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them” (319). Many claim that Foucault's early conclusions regarding power exclude any possibility of autonomy; however, Allen devotes a considerable amount of time to exploring the alleged disparities between Foucault's early and late writings. She proposes a stronger continuity than critics have traditionally recognized and thereby argues that his philosophies about power dynamics do not preclude the possibility of agency. Foucault himself claims, “I do not know whether it must be said today that the critical task [of developing a critical ontology of ourselves] still entails faith in Enlightenment; I continue to think that this task requires work on our limits, that is, a patient labor giving form to our impatience for liberty” (319). Allen maintains that the purpose of her text is ultimately systematic and constructive: “to develop a feminist critical-theoretical account of the politics of our selves that does justice to the ways in which the self is both constituted by power and simultaneously capable of being self-constituting” (4). This perspective seeks to not only understand the complex dynamics of power but to also posit various ways that progressive transformation may be achieved.

The process of transformation is ongoing. In regard to the possibility of context-transcending, Allen notes that “the gerund form is significant, as it indicates . . . a dynamic idealizing projection rather than a realizable end state” (143). Throughout this thesis, I often employ the use of gerunds, participles, and progressive verbs in order to remain consistent with the notion that all endeavors to increase one's autonomy remain perpetual activities. This perspective “neither holds out hope for the possibility of actually transcending our rootedness in our context—of blotting out time and space, as Habermas puts it—nor does it seek to reduce our normative ideals to nothing more than illusions grounded in our power-laden practices” (Allen 143). All efforts toward social improvement rest upon the premise that progress is, in fact, possible.

II. EXPLORING OLSEN'S EMPHASIS ON EXTERNAL CONSTRAINTS

Through her writing, Olsen sought to combat oppression and foster social transformation. This reflects the Left's basic premise that "fiction should show the sufferings and struggles and essential dignity of working-class people under capitalism and allow readers to see the details of their lives and work" (Rosenfelt 388). This perspective on literature empowered Olsen to compose texts that she believed would have direct bearing on the trajectory of the nation and of the world. According to Rosenfelt, "this theory told writers that their own writing could and should be a form of action in itself; art was to be a weapon in the class struggle" (388). The notion of art as a weapon—as an instrument of attack upon the status quo—runs throughout Olsen's body of work. Apart from her experimental writings as an adolescent, never do we see her engage in purely aesthetic or what she viewed as trivial endeavors; always she sought to bring awareness and consequent transformation.

Although "Tell Me a Riddle" remains more subtle in its political critique than many of her earlier works, it testifies to Olsen's convictions about proletarian and realist literature. The text demonstrates the everyday struggles of the working class. Its form is accessible, and while not being didactic, it is undeniably polemical. As Rosenfelt states, "Olsen felt herself to be part of a valid, necessary, and global movement to remake the world on a more just and humane model" (383). True to her activist roots, Olsen imbued "Tell Me a Riddle" with a strong political undercurrent. As a once-fervent member of the Communist Party, Olsen would have likely known Lenin's views on housework, that "woman continues to be a domestic slave, because petty housework crushes, strangles, stultifies and degrades her, chains her to the kitchen and to the nursery, wastes her labor on barbarously unproductive, petty, nerve-racking, stultifying and crushing drudgery" (56). The reality Lenin describes reflects Eva's situation. Domestic

responsibilities crush, strangle, stultify, and degrade her, making it nearly impossible for her to engage in the activities she considers important.

Olsen's text centers on an aging Jewish woman whose patriarchal oppression is made further manifest by economic troubles, and while this reality shares seemingly little affinity with the trends of mainstream America, the cultural climate in which Olsen wrote should not be dismissed without mention. Through "Tell Me a Riddle," published in 1961, Olsen aptly captured a minority experience that mirrors and diverges from popular culture in notable ways. Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, published just two years after Olsen's "Tell Me a Riddle," reveals culture's pressure upon women and the reality that "fulfillment as a woman had only one definition for American women after 1949—the house-wife mother" (44). Friedan's text focuses on middle- to upper-class white America, and she describes women who either decide against further education or else pursue education only to bury all public aspirations thereafter in favor of what they believe will be domestic fulfillment. As motivating these occurrences, Friedan identifies the problem of "the feminine mystique," an unnatural and harmful "image to which women were trying to conform" (9). The feminine mystique declares ". . . the highest value and the only commitment for women is the fulfillment of their own femininity" and that ". . . the root of women's troubles in the past is that women envied men and tried to be like men, instead of accepting their own nature, which can find fulfillment only in sexual passivity, male domination, and nurturing maternal love" (Friedan 43). Olsen doesn't depict Eva's problems as stemming from her attempts to embrace femininity, and as Eva is elderly, her prime years of motherhood would have occurred prior to the cultural situation that Friedan presents; however, the details of Eva's life support the argument that she—perhaps coerced by David—did embrace some of the foundational aspects of the feminine mystique.

In the text, Olsen clearly does not endorse notions of female fulfillment through male domination or maternal love, and while she approached the issue from a different angle than Friedan, Olsen's work also clearly demonstrates a rebuttal to the overarching social climate. Martha May notes that the ideologies regarding women and domesticity "suggested more about what people hoped for than what their lives had actually become" (49). Both Olsen and Friedan attack the notion that female fulfillment can be found solely in the home, counteracting misconception with reality. Friedan stated that, "We can no longer ignore the voice within women that says: 'I want something more than my husband and my children and my home'" (32). Scrawled on the bottom of a draft of "Tell Me a Riddle" is Olsen's declaration that "it was a lie that they told that husband and children were enough" (TOP 1.14). Thus, Olsen revealed the presence of a similar sentiment during the time of her production.

While the women engaged societal problems differently, both were aware of the distorting nature of domestic motherhood. As such, "Tell Me a Riddle" presciently exposes many of the issues found in Friedan's historic critique. Friedan writes that,

Once immersed in the very pressing and particular problems of domesticity, many women feel frustrated and far apart from the great issues and stirring debate for which their education has given them understanding and relish. Once they wrote poetry. Now it's the laundry list. Once they discussed art and philosophy until late in the night. Now they are so tired they fall asleep as soon as the dishes are finished. There is, often, a sense of contraction, of closing horizons and lost opportunities. They had hoped to play their part in the crises of the age. But what they do is wash the diapers. (60)

Although Eva's knowledge does not originate in an American educational institution, she, too, struggles to reconcile her intellectual abilities and social concern with the mundane tasks that comprise everyday motherhood. She poignantly demonstrates the subjugation of personal artistry and passion to the responsibilities of domestic maintenance.

Despite their condemnation of female fulfillment through domesticity, both Olsen and Friedan identify different root causes for the realities they illustrate. Friedan recognized women as largely at fault for choosing the domestic sphere, and her text consistently calls for women to make more constructive decisions. Olsen, however, chose to depict a scenario in which economic and patriarchal oppression force Eva into her harmful situation.

The force of the text's commentary on domesticity has been substantially softened in various critical responses. "Tell Me a Riddle" presents a multi-faceted portrayal of Eva, her family, and the complex dynamics that surround them, thereby conveying both hope and heartache, but many analyses focus largely on the overall optimism of the text, perhaps as critics take their cues from Olsen's later comments about her intentions for the story. In their concise biography of Olsen, Pearlman and Werlock note that with Olsen, "the emphasis is always on humankind's predilection to persevere and to overcome rather than on the innumerable opportunities that an inhumane society presents for failure and defeat" (6). While the text is a testament to the perseverance of the human spirit, Eva's demonstration of resilience is necessitated by the distorting realities that surround her. She is a woman stifled by circumstance. The text exhibits humankind's predilection toward perseverance, yet it does not culminate in achievement but in defeat. After a life of hardship, Eva's resuscitated ideals linger only long enough to journey with her to death.

Furthermore, various critics claim that the text holds a pro-motherhood message. Faulkner notes Olsen's criticism of patriarchal structures, yet she also concludes that "Olsen's repudiation of patriarchal motherhood, that 'last refuge of sexism,' as she calls it, is not in any sense a rejection of mothers or mothering" (38). Faulkner argues that Olsen's "radical subtext... insists that mothering... is meant to be tender, ecstatic, explosively creative, and revolutionary, not in some yet-to-be-created utopia, but in this world" (55). She claims that this may seem to be a "rash misreading" of "Tell Me a Riddle" (Faulkner 55). Upon examination, I believe Faulkner's conclusion is unsupportable when analyzing the text in isolation, as I shall further demonstrate in the following section.

Critical attempts to find consistent philosophical positions often result in the analysis of Olsen's general body of work, and Olsen's view of motherhood is one such area in which critics often find cohesion where seeming disparity exists. When allowed to be its own repository of meaning, "Tell Me a Riddle" shows little glorification of motherhood. While Olsen may have believed in the possibility of motherhood as Faulkner outlines, nowhere in "Tell Me a Riddle" does the text suggest Eva has been simply experiencing the wrong form; instead, children and years of caretaking are presented as objectionable realities whose effects linger inexorably over Eva. Scholars may gloss over the text's scathing critique in order to maintain cohesion in Olsen's corpus of work; however, by exposing the injustices Eva endures, the text portrays motherhood as an external constraint capable of subduing and destroying a woman's identity.

What follows is a close reading of "Tell Me a Riddle" in which I demonstrate the text's portrayal of debilitating, external constraints. In *Silences*, Olsen claims that "motherhood means being constantly interruptible, responsive, responsible. Children need one *now*. . . . It is distraction not meditation that becomes habitual; interruption, not continuity; spasmodic, not

constant, toil. Work interrupted, deferred, postponed makes blockage—at best, lesser accomplishment. Unused capacities atrophy, cease to be” (33). It is this reality that Olsen depicts in “Tell Me a Riddle.”

“AND WHAT ELSE WOULD I DO WITH MY EMPTY HANDS?”: RELEGATION,
INTERNALIZATION, AND DEATH IN “TELL ME A RIDDLE”

Throughout “Tell Me a Riddle,” Olsen reveals a situation of victimization. Patriarchal motherhood, financial hardship, and, ultimately, cancer arise as external constraints that lead to Eva’s physical and emotional disfigurement. Her oppression is thus social, economic, and biological. Trapped at seemingly every angle, she appears incapable of transcending her circumstances; her only attempt at resistance is a refusal to abdicate the domestic sphere. Robert Coles calls Eva an “angry grandmother” who only “wants to be left alone” (114). However, that is indeed an oversimplification. Eva’s actions are an illustration of Judith Butler’s theory of subjection in which a subordinated person becomes fervently attached to their subordinated state, thereby desiring and perpetuating their own subordination (Allen 73). When faced with the possibility of losing her identity, Eva accepts and refuses to relinquish her societally imposed role. Superficially, she is finally reacting against the external forces that have continually defined her. Yet in attempting to refuse patriarchal commands, she thereby stakes her battle upon the soil of domestic motherhood. The discovery of cancer follows soon after.

While the revival of her idealism is notable, it is ultimately overwhelmed by the malignancy that has been spreading undetected for years, a reality indicative of the societal pressures which have been slowly eliminating her selfhood. Patriarchal motherhood, coupled with economic hardship, has reduced her to mere domestic use value, threatening a total

destruction of self; consequently, when her children are grown and her husband desires to eliminate her position altogether, Eva necessarily cannot exist. Her physical death, therefore, is the metaphorical representation of the inner death of her personhood.

Reduction to Labor Value: The Flood of Need

Before experiencing the distorting effects of patriarchal motherhood, Eva was intimately involved in the righting of social wrongs. Throughout the text, readers learn of the passion that characterized her youth. For Eva, membership in the Bund appears as a meaningful pursuit, an activity from which she derived identity. However, as Faulkner notes, “the very qualities that made Eva a revolutionary—her outspoken eloquence, independent thought, and active membership in a political community—made her singularly unfit for the familiar American mold of passive wife and mother whose world is her home” (Faulkner 91). When the text opens, readers encounter Eva as a woman intent on keeping her home; gone is all semblance of a woman intimately tied to efforts for social change.

Throughout the first half of the text, both Eva and her family members testify to her monolithic identity. When David attempts to coerce her to move to a cooperative home, he tells her there will be “no dishes, no garbage, no towel to sop, no worry what to buy, what to eat” (Olsen, “Tell” 35). Eva thus replies, “And what else would I do with my empty hands?” (Olsen, “Tell” 35). While readers may interpret such a response as facetious, her actions give us no reason to read it as such; consequently, her statement seems indicative of a troubling reality: she has so internalized the message of patriarchal society that she cannot comprehend an existence apart from domestic motherhood. The revolutionary Eva appears largely absent, existing only in flashbacks, and at the end of her life when she experiences a resurgence of belief. While deep within her psyche, Eva may have continually adhered to her humanistic ideals, these convictions

lie buried. Upon the resurgence of her belief at the end of the text, David asks, “Still you believed? You lived by it?” (Olsen, “Tell” 82). As one who lived in close proximity to Eva, his astonishment is revelatory. That which once imbued her life with a strong sense of purpose—her humanist belief—has been so strongly suppressed that he cannot believe it survived their years of struggle. This is a testament to the extent to which Eva’s passion has been subdued—although not fully abandoned.

Eva’s mutterings reveal glimpses into the past, providing explanations for her disfigured sense of self. Almost at the point of death, she regresses, muttering “one pound soup meat... one soup bone... bread, day-old... the thread, hah, the thread breaks. Cheap thread” (Olsen, “Tell” 82). In these fragmentary recollections, we glimpse scarcity, shame, and struggle. Even in their twilight years, Eva and David still feel the pressure of money—and Eva’s memories clearly show that economic burden has been a lifelong companion to them both. David himself recalls Eva’s past mantra: “better mankind born without mouths and stomachs than always to worry for the money to buy, to shop, to fix, to cook, to wash, to clean” (Olsen, “Tell” 35). Yet the living do have basic needs, and as such, Eva and David have worry and hardship.

As a woman, Eva has been responsible to meet the children’s needs in spite of financial hardship. She tells David, “Let me alone about money. Was there ever enough? Seven little ones—for every penny I had to ask—and sometimes, remember, there was nothing. But I always had to manage” (Olsen, “Tell” 37). Engaged in wageless labor, Eva bears the burden of seven children, yet she relies on David to provide the money necessary for her to complete her essential tasks. In times of lack, she is utterly dependent on the systems around her, an instrument of labor production rather than income production. While her husband’s inability to provide appears as no fault of her own, she must bear the consequences. Her realm is one of response. She is both

powerless yet depended upon: forced to give, even when she herself has not received. Caught in a reactionary position, she must continually respond to the economic climate around her.

Eva's inability to fulfill her responsibilities leads to shame. The text states that,

But from those years she had had to manage, old humiliations and terrors rose up, lived again, and forced her to relive them. The children's needing; that grocer's face or this merchant's wife she had had to beg credit from when credit was a disgrace; the scenery of the long blocks walked around when she could not pay; school coming, and the desperate going over the old to see what could yet be remade; the soups of meat bones begged 'for-the-dog' one winter. (Olsen, "Tell" 37)

Eva manages to coerce credit based on the future merit of her husband's production. She experiences further humiliation upon not being able to pay, yet that shame is not of her own creating. Her task is to care for the children and the home, and we hear the ways in which she does so to the extent that she is able. Still she wears her husband's disgrace. Faced with a situation of lack, she turns to humility and improvisation, for she cannot right the situation. She is ultimately buffeted by David's ineffectuality as breadwinner. Hers truly is a position of futile struggle.

As a man amidst a patriarchal system, David possesses more agency than Eva, but nowhere does he display subversive action. Instead, he demonstrates adherence to patriarchal gender roles. Eva reveals that he "never scraped a carrot or knew a dish towel sops" (Olsen, "Tell" 35). In his failure to assist Eva with her burdens, he is thus a perpetuator of the

circumstances that disfigure Eva's personhood. Unlike the case of Anna and Jim in *Yonnonadio*, "David does not beat or rape Eva, but he still manipulates her to fulfill his needs, still tries to make her into the person he wants her to be, and most important, is still blind to the fact that Eva *is* a person to be known and respected" (Faulkner 72). While his inability to provide financially may arise from no fault of his own, he is still responsible for his response to Eva's struggles.

David uses the agency society affords him to reinforce the boundaries of Eva's constraints rather than to nurture her own intellectual and social proclivities. He therefore fails to encourage her personhood. She herself accuses: "And forty years ago when the children were morsels and there was a [reading] Circle, did you stay home with them once so I could go? Even once? You trained me well" (Olsen, "Tell" 36). Eva's statement implies that he had the opportunity to alleviate her childcare responsibilities and to allow her meaningful intellectual activity, yet he chose otherwise. Furthermore, she suggests that his treatment of her has had an impact on how she interacts with the world around her.

Memory brings pain, thereby testifying to the negative nature of the events which radically altered the course of Eva's life. After "old scar tissue [ruptures] and the wounds [fester] anew," she remembers the difficulty of pursuing her interests (Olsen, "Tell" 36). She "[thinks] without softness of the young wife, who in the deep night hours while she nursed the current baby, and perhaps held another in her lap, would try to stay awake for the only time there was to read" (Olsen, "Tell" 36). This time of inconvenient and desperate mental activity would end when, "coming late from a meeting, he would find her so, and stimulated and ardent, sniffing her skin, coax: 'I'll put the baby to bed, and you—put the book away, don't read, don't read'" (Olsen, "Tell" 36-37). Based on his history of social activism, the meetings David attends are

most likely political gatherings. It is notable that his involvement has not ended due to childcare duties.

Although they once shared an interest in social reform, Eva has been relegated to the domestic sphere while David continues to partake in activities that are meaningful to him. Gone are the days when Eva would participate as an orator in political assemblies. She remains confined to the home. While she manages to steal short increments of time to read novels, nowhere does David encourage this pursuit, even though it appears especially meaningful to her. Reading seems to be Eva's last connection to social issues and the world outside the domestic sphere, and it is significant that David attempts to dissuade her against it. In his actions, he reinforces her monolithic identity.

The only example of David assisting with childcare duties occurs when it serves his purposes. The text's description of David as "stimulated and ardent, sniffing her skin, [coaxing]" reveals a sexual hunger (Olsen, "Tell" 37). In the 1980 film version of "Tell Me a Riddle," this interplay culminates in a tender lovemaking scene ("Tell").¹ However, while it seems that David's comment is motivated by his sexual desire, the text does not seem to sentimentalize the moment. David's arousal appears to stem from an incitement of passion that occurred at his meeting, yet he denies Eva's own passion by coercing her not to read. He proves that he is capable of helping with the children, but only does so for his own gain. Although he could easily have put the baby to bed in order to allow Eva a few moments of uninterrupted reading, his words are not motivated by a desire for her wellbeing. As such, he does not offer; instead, he commands.

David's blatant lack of concern for Eva is again apparent when, years later, he tries to coerce her to sell the house. David still appears as a victim of financial difficulty, yet as in his

youth, this reality does not negate the reprehensibility of his actions. Yet again, he acts according to his own desires, seeking to convince Eva that the decision to move is best for her when he truly seems to give little consideration for her welfare. All of the textual commentary regarding his motivations for selling the house center upon his own needs: to congregate with people, to avoid the labor of maintaining a home, and to be free from economic worry. Never does the text reveal him to genuinely believe that the cooperative home will be best for Eva. When Eva refuses to agree with his point of view, he complains about her unreasonableness to the children, shirking all responsibility for their argument or the conditions that have led to their financial hardship. The actions of his old age—pushing to sell while failing to discover or meet the needs of his wife—show striking resemblance to the actions of his youth. In both instances, he acts out of personal desire rather than sacrificial love. He has relegated Eva to domestic activity, condescending to help only when it serves his own purposes.

Eva's children also propel her toward sole identification with domestic responsibility. Seven children inherently drive a mother to intense labor, and the text shows the sense of responsibility which the children aroused in her. After Eva cannot bear to hold her grandson, the text notes that it has been "*a long travel from, to, what the feel of a baby evokes*" [emphasis in the original] (Olsen, "Tell" 51). This experience creates a negative physiological reaction in Eva as "a long shudder begins, and the sweat beads on her forehead" (Olsen, "Tell" 51). While many critics manage to coerce a positive affirmation of motherhood from the pages of "Tell Me a Riddle," the text itself appears decidedly clear about the adverse effects it has had on Eva. The text states that "it was not that [Eva] had not loved her babies, her children. The love—the passion of tending—had risen with the need like a torrent; and like a torrent drowned and immolated all else" (Olsen, "Tell" 52). This affirms that she felt love; however, the language

implies a violent cataclysm. The flood imagery is starkly negative, and it seems impossible to imbue the verbs “drowned” and “immolated” with positive connotation (Olsen, “Tell” 52).

Even a mother’s biological response to the needs of her child appears as a burden, an external constraint that hinders personal fulfillment, rather than a positive occurrence. The text describes a baby as “immediacy to embrace. . . warm flesh. . . that [has] claims and [nuzzles] away all else and with lovely mouths [devours]; hot-living like an animal—intensely and now; the turning maze; the long drunkenness; the drowning into needing and being needed. Severely she [looks] back—and the shudder [seizes] her again, and the sweat” (Olsen, “Tell” 53).

Drunkenness carries a potentially positive connotation; however, situated as it is, it does not seem to be indicating a positive reality. The passage highlights the inability that accompanies drunkenness. In this conception, conscious decision and action are impossible, as one’s state consequently limits one’s capacity. The drunkenness of motherhood forces one to wait the passing of time before full faculty is once again possible; it is a numbing of the senses that brings impotence and helplessness. Similar connotations arise when thinking about motherhood as a turning maze: it is a reality ever-changing, yet inescapable. Due to Olsen’s word choices, the text is noticeably violent. The text characterizes children as devouring mouths that cause a “drowning into needing and being needed” (Olsen, “Tell” 53). The emphasis is on the futility of the situation. The notion of drowning suggests that something is being overwhelmed, perhaps never to be resuscitated. Metaphorically, the flood of mothering is damaging, and Eva cannot bear to remember the process of her old identity being overwhelmed by the demands of motherhood. Once the flood departs, however, there is only lack.

Elimination of Labor Need: The Desert of Futility

After describing the experience of motherhood, the text then navigates the consequences. These, too, appear markedly damaging. While Olsen uses flood imagery to describe the overwhelming sense of being needed by her children, she then transitions to desert imagery. Noticeably, she allows the pendulum to swing from one extreme to the other, bypassing all middle ground that could be construed as refreshing and life-giving. Instead,

. . . when the need was done—oh the power that was lost in the painful damming back and drying up of what still surged, but had nowhere to go. Only the thin pulsing left that could not quiet, suffering over lives one felt, but could no longer hold nor help.

On the torrent she had borne them to their own lives, and the riverbed was desert long years now. 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. If they would leave her in the air now stilled of clamor, in the reconciled solitude, to journey on. (Olsen, “Tell” 52-53)

This passage reveals the unnaturalness Eva has experienced: her overwhelming identification with the needs of her children and then their relinquishment of her assistance. This reality has left Eva as a desert, almost fully devoid of life-giving purpose. Although she muses, “surely that was not all, surely there was more,” no answer regarding the “more” arises (Olsen, “Tell” 53).

Without seven children to care for and without any recognition of what the “more” could be, Eva clings to the identity she derives from her place in the home.

In the wake of all-consuming mothering, Eva’s sense of purpose inevitably falters. The text presents even the longevity of Eva and David’s marriage as stemming from the complementary nature of their roles in raising a family, rather than an ardent commitment to each other. As the opening paragraph notes, “only now, when the tending to the needs of others no longer shackled them together, the roots [of the quarrel] swelled up visible, split the earth between them” (33). Without familial responsibility to bind them, their relationship is in danger. Early in the text, Lennie writes to Clara about their parents, questioning “They’ve lived over so much together; what could possibly tear them apart?” (34). However, the more pertinent question reveals itself: after being relegated to a relationship of economic exchange, what can possibly hold them together after the need has vanished?

David easily morphs according to others’ expectations. Eva criticizes him for this, saying “already it makes me sick to think of you always around others. Clown, grimacer, floormat, yesman, entertainer, whatever they want of you” (36). She judges David as capitulating to the whims of those around him. To her, his antics are sickening, and her attitude implies that she deems his changeability to be a betrayal of principle.

Eva, however, refuses to yield. Financial need continues to burden David, and he once again expects Eva to submit to his demands. However, Eva appears unwilling to abdicate her role. In contrast to David’s characterization as an entertainer, she resolutely states that she knows no riddles. As the title of the text, the notion of riddle-telling deserves attention. Interestingly, while “tell me a riddle” is the request Eva’s granddaughter makes, Eva’s answer emerges as far more notable: “*I know no riddles*” [emphasis in the original] (Olsen, “Tell” 55). Whereas David

morphs to be the amusement others desire—to accommodate their whims—Eva’s response reveals an inability to do so. It is an inability stemming from a lack rather than a refusal. Coiner identifies that Eva’s response appears in the context of command performance (“Better” 211). As such, Eva’s rejection of the command demonstrates her incapacity for accommodation.

Similarly, despite her great transition from revolutionary to mother and housewife, she isn’t able to morph again according to the dictates of her circumstances. Eva’s role is no longer valued, yet she refuses to relinquish it. Instead, she experiences

. . . tranquility from having the empty house no longer an enemy, for it stayed clean—not as in the days when it was her family, the life in it, that had seemed the enemy: tracking, smudging, littering, dirtying, engaging her in endless defeating battle—and on whom her endless defeat had been spewed. (Olsen, “Tell” 38)

Eva’s sense of self has been so disfigured by her trials of motherhood that she can no longer imagine an existence apart from household labor. She has seemingly triumphed over the domestic sphere, yet this reality is characterized as a desert. Truly, she has no purpose from which to derive meaning. Her loved ones no longer appreciate her cooking, cleaning, and caring, rendering her afloat in a sort of abeyant state, cut off from the very utility that society and her family forced upon her.

While Eva’s family contributes to her decline into life as an instrument of production, they cannot comprehend the underlying reasons for her actions. Daughter Nancy laments Eva’s commitment to domestic maintenance, complaining “the way she attacks my kitchen, scrubbing

under every cup hook, doing the inside of the oven so I can't enjoy Sunday dinner, knowing that half-blind or not, she's going to find every speck of dirt" (Olsen, "Tell" 41). An unnamed sibling responds, "it's the only way she knows to be useful" (Olsen, "Tell" 41). In this statement lies the primary tension of the text: Eva no longer understands herself to be valuable apart from the role society has dictated. Despite the impediments of her aging body, even her failing eyesight, she remains resolutely committed to eradicating the dirt and the dust, for in those actions, she understands her sense of worth.

Inability to Reconcile: The Journey toward Death

In Eva's refusal to move to the Haven, the cooperative home that, as David promises, can provide for their every need and want, she demonstrates resistance. Ironically, in her seemingly conventional retort "And what else would I do with my empty hands?" she refuses to capitulate to David's commands, thereby demonstrating opposition to both David and the hegemonic society which he represents. She is both embracing the reality forced upon her—a life of domestic labor—and simultaneously subverting the same patriarchal structure by refusing to surrender to her husband's demands.

Eva thus looks for liberation amidst the very role that has eroded her sense of self. This tension drives the narrative. While she may have been able to find time to engage in reading and intellectual activity at the Haven, thereby resurrecting the parts of herself that have lain dormant for years, she nevertheless cannot accept having her trajectory prescribed for her again. In discussing Butler's view of subjection, Allen writes that,

The very identity of the subordinated subject is dependent upon the relations of power that shape it. The dismantling of those relations of power, then, threatens

the subject's identity and sense of self. Because these relations of power both sustain the subject's identity and subordinate her—and sustain her identity by subordinating her—she develops an attachment to them, despite the damage done by subordination. Faced with a choice between an identity based on subordination and no identity at all, the subordinated subject chooses the former. (75)

While deliverance from domestic chores would seemingly be liberating for Eva, she understands the shift only as a loss of identity. She refuses to yield her home, for while it would mean freedom from menial tasks, it would also mean destruction of her sense of self. As Jean Pfaelzer states, “to sell the house would deprive her of her only power, if only the illusion of power” (5). Eva thus chooses subordination, thereby illustrating what Butler describes as the reality that, “to affirm one's existence is to capitulate to one's subordination” (Butler 79). Eva's attempted resistance thus becomes the impetus for the death of her selfhood.

Consequently, Eva's physical death is a metaphorical necessity. In her double-bind, she cannot succeed. Although accepting David's demands would possibly lead to freedom for her own pursuits, Eva has been so disfigured by past demands that she cannot envision a positive outcome; instead, agreeing to his terms would mean once again yielding to the desires of others. And in her refusal, she continues to maintain identification with a self-eroding role.

Eva's journey toward the death of her selfhood, however, goes largely unnoticed by her family. Rather than seeking Eva's well-being, Eva's daughter Vivi appears intent on her own catharsis. Vivi's tears and memories, “spilling so fast,” reveal her emotional need to recapture the past (Olsen, “Tell” 56). In her frenzied recollections, she demonstrates little concern for Eva's needs. The text characterizes the family members' attention as an attack: “day after day,

the spilling memories. Worse now, questions, too. Even the grandchildren: Grandma, in the olden days, when you were little..." (Olsen, "Tell" 57). Their prodding and reminiscing further distances Eva from any semblance of ataraxia. Vivi believes that Eva will find it meaningful to hold her grandson; however, this notion reveals utter ignorance of Eva's state of mind and the struggles she experienced.

While Vivi may claim that she intends Eva's holding of the baby to be meaningful to Eva, it is more meaningful for Vivi herself, who through anecdotes and reminiscences is actively trying to establish connections to the past—to the tender times between mother and daughter. Vivi's desire for Eva to hold the baby may thus be a manifestation of Vivi's internal longing for mental transport. Eva, however, cannot bear to experience the regression. While it may be therapeutic for Vivi, it is intolerable for her mother. Vivi's interactions with Eva are indicative of the family's widespread ignorance of Eva's reality.

Overwhelmingly, Eva gives rather than receives, and whether explicitly or inadvertently, her immediate family robs her of all that appears meaningful. Erika Duncan writes that Jewish mothers "are the 'bread givers' who try to make feeding into a replenishing, ecstatic act. But the mothers are themselves starved in every way, sucked dry and withered from being asked almost from birth to give a nurturance they never receive. They are starved not only for the actual food they are forced to turn over to others, but for the stuff of self and soul, for love and song" (232). It is a hopeful instance in the text when David awakens to find Eva singing amidst a thunder storm. Eva states, "I can breathe now" before continuing to faintly sing an old Russian love song (Olsen, "Tell" 44). Amidst her loneliness, song rejuvenates Eva. She connects to humanity through music, and later while dying, she again turns to song. Song, however, is something Eva experiences in stolen moments. After she sings in the storm, David insists she come inside,

thereby simultaneously silencing her. On her deathbed, delirium impedes her song. Never do we glimpse Eva as experiencing music uninhibited—and never do we see anyone encouraging her to do so. As for the denial of love that Duncan mentions, it, too, applies to Eva. For the majority of the text, David and the children's love appears conditional. When Eva refuses to abide by what they deem best, they are unable to imagine her perspective; she is thus dehumanized and her viewpoint, needs, and desires unacknowledged. Consequently, her immediate family denies her love when she needs it most.

Only Eva's granddaughter Jeannie shows unprecedented understanding of Eva's situation. When Eva asks Jeannie to speak with the doctor about going home, Jeannie ascertains the situation quickly, responding, "Of course, poor Granny. You want your own things around you, don't you?" (Olsen, "Tell" 68). While other family members have made demands on Eva, coercing David to bring her on cross-country trips so that they can make their peace, Jeannie acknowledges Eva's desires. Moreover, she recognizes them as normal and understandable: Eva is no unloving, unnatural grandmother; rather she is a weary woman who can no longer afford to continue pouring herself out to satiate the desires of her family.

Toward the end of her life, Eva does haphazardly express her long-held beliefs—beliefs that have been repressed but not relinquished. She retains a radical vision of collective humanity despite the social atrocities of the twentieth century, and her delirious, near-death mumblings include words from her "youth of belief" and questions regarding the horror of human brutality (Olsen 79). To David it seems that "for seventy years she had hidden a tape recorder, infinitely microscopic, within her, that it had coiled infinite mile on mile, trapping every song, every melody, every word read, heard, and spoken" (Olsen 77-78). Her fragmentary speech unveils her inner reality, a reality that testifies to both her distortion by—yet defiance of—oppression.

Her defiance of oppression, however, should not outweigh the reality of the distortion. While often throughout the text she chooses silence over language, in the end, her very aptitude for language abandons her. Rodrigo Andrés argues that her “progressive loss of language” emphasizes her “loss of agency and consequent objectification” (360). Her lingering idealism is a positive manifestation of the resilience of the human spirit, and while it is a great triumph that she retains a semblance of her youthful ideals, this triumph is only made possible by the great injustices that have plagued her life.

Only at the end of the text do we see David finally attempt to comprehend his wife’s inner turmoil and passions. Even still, readers have no way of measuring the extent to which his positive realizations will endure or transform his future actions. As Faulkner notes, “the story’s final, powerful image shows David and Eva with their hands clasped as though they were feeding each other” (73). However, this moment of nurturance is a response to a crisis; Olsen “leaves unanswered the question of whether in calmer, more ordinary times” David “would return to [his] old habitual blindness” (Faulkner 73). While the text presents a glimmer of promise, it provides little certainty.

One of the greatest tragedies of the text is that only Eva’s imminent death causes David to comprehend and mourn all that she repressed. While Jeannie’s affirming actions appear to be an impetus for Eva’s re-espousal of dormant beliefs, the resuscitation of her personhood appears too late. In the end, Jeannie reassures David by positing Eva’s return to the state of being she lost so long ago:

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. (Olsen, "Tell" 84)

Jeannie realizes the passion and connection to community that Eva surrendered in life, and her words actively convey an idealized return. The words, however, provide nothing for Eva. Instead, they are merely a manifestation of Eva's earlier statement that "the living must comfort themselves" (Olsen, "Tell" 69). Eva has rejected religion, and nowhere in the text does she embrace the notion of existence after death. Jeannie's musings are merely attempts to comfort the living, for Eva's death proves the definitive end to a life of oppression and inability. While Jeannie's trajectory adds a sense of hopeful expectation to the text, the story culminates in Eva's death. Readers can feel a sense of exultation over Jeannie's possibilities, yet we must inevitably mourn Eva's reality. The resurgence of her dormant beliefs in her final days is a testament to the perseverance of the human spirit, but the circumstances that demanded such perseverance are not glorified in the text, nor should they be ignored.

Olsen's text is a criticism of the structures—economic and social—that lead to the debilitation of women. Possibility for a brighter future is embodied in Jeannie, yet Eva's reality looms over the text. Disfigured by years of oppression, she finally rejects the role her husband is attempting to impose because she cannot surrender her sense of self. She thus attempts to resist subordination by embracing subordination. Consequently, Eva proceeds toward death, as the cancer metaphorically mirrors the deterioration of her personhood.

Her regressions and incoherent musings reveal the torrent of emotion that lay unacted upon yet irrevocable. For Eva, “a life lived only within a house, voyages of discovery launched only within a mind, communal bonds that exist only in memory and imagination, are a kind of death for a woman who, as a girl, was part of a revolutionary movement that aimed to change the world” (Faulkner 89). While various critics see hope in the portrait of Eva as a woman who has not fully relinquished her deep commitments, the text relays futility rather than possibility. Eva is slowly and steadily slipping from consciousness, moving further and further away from being able to act upon her convictions. All that she could have been—all that she had a mind to be—is encompassed in her quotations and ramblings, yet by the time she utters them, it is too late for her ambitions to come to fruition. As her life expires, her words are merely a dirge to her lost selfhood.

In its intimate portrait of Eva, the text raises awareness of complex social problems. Olsen’s literary convictions—grounded in the literary theory of the Left—demand that texts be not merely artistic explorations but also weapons that seek to impart real change in a world of dire injustices. This is part of her communal vision, and as such, “Tell Me a Riddle” is not merely a beautiful and intricate portrait of reality, but a call for action. It does not applaud the circumstances of Eva’s story; instead, it honors the woman while condemning the external constraints that perpetrate her relegation to domestic oppression.

“THERE IS SOMETHING MORE THAN HUSBAND AND BABIES”: THE PHILOSOPHY BEHIND THE TEXT

While “Tell Me a Riddle” certainly conveys a pointed critique of patriarchal motherhood, Olsen’s drafts of the story also provide interesting details about her philosophy and the way that

philosophy affected her final text. Olsen meticulously labored over the development of the story, and many variations of scenes survive as part of the Tillie Olsen Papers (TOP). Tiny, nearly illegible comments and corrections appear throughout these pages. In addition to numerous handwritten notes, a wealth of introspective commentary is preserved as typewritten digressions or summaries of her intended purposes.

The drafts reveal much about Olsen herself. During composition, she was inarguably conscious of gender issues. In describing Eva, Olsen states that “once [Eva] had participated, been important, as an individual, as a human being, not as a mother or wife” (TOP 1.6). On another page, she penned, “It was a lie that they told that husband and children were enough” (TOP 1.14). Olsen thus explicitly reveals her belief that family life stifles and reduces possibility for women. She also delineates societal expectations for boys and girls, thereby affirming her awareness of the cultural conditioning that leads to gender subordination: “to the girl babies they said: You be darling, cunning, ingratiating, deeply conscious that how you look is important and the time you must put on this, and responsive and cuddly. To the boy babies they said: you be strong, adventurous, bold” (TOP 2.3). The Eva of the drafts realizes the restrictive nature of her domesticity, as she cries out “there is something more than husband and babies” (TOP 1.14). In the final text, Eva never articulates the causes of her oppression or the possibility of fuller life although the patriarchal critique remains.

Crossed-off words and scrawls in the margins allow one to make inferences about Olsen’s motivations for shifting the meaning. In one draft, Olsen wrote about Eva’s broken reality, referencing it as the reality that “life had helped her to”; however, handwritten above the word “helped,” Olsen scrawled “(forced?)” (TOP 2.3). It seems that Olsen did not believe “helped” was a strong enough indicator of the sheer power of external constraints. “Helped”

implies that circumstances participated with something else; “forced,” however, leaves little room for assigning any fault to Eva. This simple change is evidence of her shift toward eliminating all semblance of Eva’s agency and reaffirming the inescapability of external forces.

Even small details are revelatory. In a list of what Olsen intended to include in the text, she adds “how life hurt her,” a seeming reference to Eva (TOP 1.6). Olsen clearly intends “life” to be the perpetrator of harm, leaving Eva as a victim. An early version of a meaningful passage reads: “Being able at last to live within and not move to the rhythms of others, as life had helped her to: blunting off people, rousing her against people, making people impossible for her, walled herself off from contact with humanity living in isolation ACHIEVED solitude... wounded, rent by the past” [emphasis in the original] (TOP 2.3). She thus frames the past as the entity which wounded and rent Eva. Another summarizing ramble reveals that Olsen conceived of the harmful past as composed of “language difficulties, difficulties of culture, [Eva’s] own tiredness, the house, you mentioned the battle with the house, that drudgery and the world that entered in and took the children – those pulls, drives not of her making” (TOP 1.6). The notion of Eva’s difficulties as “not of her making” is clearly seen in the final text. However, such clear-cut assignment of blame is not so easy to identify in various early drafts.

“Tell Me a Riddle” is its own repository of meaning. It alone is the final product that Olsen produced and intended for public dissemination; the drafts of the story are something else entirely. Apart from the persisting New Critical precepts that demand attention be paid to the text alone, the drafts reveal far too many differences to be of any definitive use in understanding the Eva and David that appear in the final version. Their evolution, however, is interesting.

In several drafts, Eva is strikingly less sympathetic while David appears much more so. The appearance of a less sympathetic Eva is indeed conspicuous. In one scene, Eva protests a

reunion with David's sister Rochel. Some falling out of long ago has left Eva unwilling to forgive despite the fact that Rochel is willing to make amends, to "make peace, as if nothing had happened" (TOP 1.15). In addition to Eva's argument with David about selling the house, this then is the second argument in which Eva is involved. At the bottom of the page, daughter Nancy reacts to Eva's position, telling David ". . . let her stew a while. . . . You can't let it destroy you" (TOP 1.15). This scene frames Eva as harmful to David. Furthermore, by revealing Eva at the center of another argument, the draft makes Eva seem consistently disagreeable. In the final text, Eva mentions that David ignored her agonized comments about lack of money while raising the children;² in the drafts, an aged Eva likewise ignores David's money trouble, "pretending not to see him prying over the bills, adding up the lines of figures" (TOP 1.5). This similarity makes Eva seem as reprehensible as David.

Remnants of Eva's transition back to a more sympathetic character are apparent throughout the drafts, as demonstrated by various corrections. At one point, after referencing David's struggles and how the Haven would provide a solution, the text reads "But she – ~~half deaf, half blind, never easy with others~~ – would not consider it" (TOP 1.8). The references to her physically deteriorating state make her seem senile and ornery. The claim that she has never been easy with others reinforces the notion that she has always been disagreeable. As such, this early characterization of Eva makes it much easier to assign her blame for the troubles that befall her. The strike-through is notable, as it eliminates all elements of Eva's potential culpability.

The final text does not portray motherhood as something which Eva openly embraced; however, the drafts recurrently speak of her desire for family, which also stands as evidence that Eva's own decisions contributed to her situation. Vivi states, "Mother always loved babies so" (TOP 2.3). During the scene when Eva laments that David never allowed her to attend a reading

circle years ago, he replies, “Who could tear you away from your babies?” (TOP 1.8). As such, the text suggests that Eva chose her children rather than her passions. Yet a handwritten line strikes out the sentence from the scene. The fact that these and similar references did not make it into the final text reveals a shift away from any possibility of assigning blame to Eva.

In addition to a different conception of Eva, the drafts reveal a much more sympathetic David. Even the scene in which David suggests separation appears more nuanced. The draft reads: “‘Then live alone.’ He could control himself no longer. ‘I have a buyer for the house. Half the money for you, half for me. Either alone, or with me to the Haven. We cannot live as we are doing now. But rather I would have you come with me’” (TOP 2.2). Olsen made subtle changes to this passage, yet the impact is considerable: “‘Then live alone!’ He could control himself no longer. ‘I have a buyer for the house. Half the money for you, half for me. Either alone or with me to the Haven. You think I can live any longer as we are doing now?’” (Olsen, “Tell” 46). In the final text, he uses “I” rather than “we” to demonstrate his own personal inability to live as they have been (Olsen, “Tell” 46). This shift makes David seem much more self-centered in the final text than in the draft. Furthermore, his kind statement about wanting Eva to come with him does not appear in the final version, and this nuance largely affects the overall tone of the passage. In other instances as well, David seems more caring. Despite Eva’s refusal to reconcile with Rochel, he appears as peacemaker. He explains his actions as an attempt to fulfill the doctor’s orders for her to see people, and the text does not hint at any ulterior motive (TOP 1.15).

In various drafts, Olsen gives more attention to David’s anguish. In the final text, she largely portrays his personal needs as motivating his underhanded attempts at persuasion, thereby distracting from his genuine heartache. The David that emerges in the drafts, however, is much more humanized. In places, the text reveals his personal needs in a way that elicits

sympathy. As Eva dies, David thinks, “A lifetime you tended, and now not a word from us. Left us indeed? Left me. And who will sit by me when it is my time? And who will tend and listen and puzzle?” (TOP 1.6). Olsen omitted the last two questions from the final text. Without them, the words sound accusatory, as if he is blaming Eva rather than wrestling with the prospect of loss and the inevitable loneliness that will follow her death.

The early conceptions of Eva and David are significant. Eva appears less a victim and much more an agent in her transition from revolutionary to housewife. Her character seems more flawed and David’s less so, which softens the patriarchal critique. Olsen’s story, had she continued with the original conceptions of Eva and David, would have likely resulted in largely different interpretational possibilities. The overarching plotline remains the same, yet the couple’s development from the drafts to the final text reveals deliberate characterization. In the drafts, Olsen originally depicts Eva’s actions as greatly contributing to her situation, whereas the final text fails to provide any evidence of Eva’s culpability.

In Olsen’s omissions and substitutions, she reveals a distinct shift. She deletes scenes and phrases that color Eva negatively, as well as those that color David more positively. Coupled with Olsen’s commentary on gender roles that arises throughout her drafts of the story, this characterization seems intentional. As such, it appears as further evidence of Olsen’s intent to expose the external constraints that inhibit personhood while disregarding—or perhaps avoiding—the internal constraints.

NOTES

¹ Interestingly, the tag line for the film states, “A love story that became a marriage that became a love story,” which tellingly reveals the slant with which producers portrayed Eva’s journey toward death. The back cover claims that it is “a tender story of rediscovering love.” While one can argue that love is indeed recaptured, such a distorted emphasis on this one facet denies many of the most important aspects of the text.

² Eva to David: “How cleverly you hid that you heard” (Olsen, “Tell” 35).

III. IDENTIFYING INTERNAL CONSTRAINTS

As noted in the introduction, Olsen's life provides an inescapable subtext to her work. Yet much of the extant scholarship presents an idealized, incomplete picture of Olsen. Since Olsen's life has such a strong bearing on her work, it becomes necessary to seek greater objectivity in analysis than has been achieved in much of the extant scholarship. This is made possible largely by Reid's biographical work. In *Silences*, Olsen states "in the twenty years I bore and reared my children, usually had to work on a paid job as well, the simplest circumstances for creation did not exist" (19). According to Olsen, her work died as a result of external constraints, and yet hope for the possibility of writing drove her to "conscious storing," "snatched reading," and "beginnings of writing" (*Silences* 19). Olsen presented herself as a persevering artist, and for decades this existed as the dominant narrative surrounding her life. By characterizing herself as both victimized yet determined, Olsen's sought to cultivate an image that greatly resembled that of her most famous protagonist.

OLSEN'S RELATION TO EVA

In many ways Eva's reality bears a distinct affinity to Olsen's. Both critics and Olsen herself have identified Ida Goldberg, Olsen's mother, as the inspiration for Eva. Regardless of the ways that Goldberg resembles and may have inspired Olsen's original conception, Eva emerges as Olsen's foil. While not specifically making a connection between Olsen and Eva, Suzanne Brown perceives that Olsen's characters "are eerily similar to herself; they are revolutionaries, lovers of beauty, and most importantly, they struggle to break free of the cloaks that are their domestic lives" (11). Of all Olsen's characters, Brown's description best describes Eva. Jane Silverman Van Buren believes that Olsen fashioned Eva as an "alter ego" who shares a similar

dilemma (161). Given Eva's characterization, such conclusions seem accurate. As Janet Burstein points out, Eva's "need and anger appear to reflect Olsen's long acquaintance with oppression, rebellion, and the frustration of working class women" (98). Olsen herself seemed to admit a resemblance to Eva, for after a brief sketch of her plans for "Tell Me a Riddle," she questioned, "And which daughter were you?" (TOP 16.25). Her answer: "I was that old woman hunched in the closet . . . trying to come to some coherence and everything knocked all life soft curling tendrils become blows that knocked and ten years later I am still that old woman and the need for the quiet for shielding from any more blows any more life" ¹ (TOP 16.25). More than mutual oppression, however, renders Eva and Olsen worthy of comparison.

Both Eva and Olsen demonstrate similar beliefs about the social and intellectual spheres. Histories of activism and passion for justice are the most noticeable parallels. Eva was an orator in the failed 1905 Russian revolution; Olsen began her political career as a member of the YCL before transitioning into the CP-USA. Both women initially sought reform, acting volitionally for change rather than accepting the realities that society imposed. They were revolutionaries with a communal vision, attempting to better the world for present and future generations. Eva muses, "How have we come from our savage past, how no longer to be savage—this to teach. To look back and learn what humanizes—this to teach. To smash all ghettos that divide us—this to teach" (Olsen 50). She thus espouses the humanism that Olsen works so hard to perpetuate in her activism and writing. The women are united in their recognition of mankind's potential to reflect on past injustices and to progress toward a future of unification.

In their attempts to impart social change, both women experience a measure of failure. The 1905 Russian revolution is unsuccessful, and Eva transitions into a radically different sphere of life, seemingly relinquishing all lofty pursuits of social justice in her new role as American

housewife who struggles for the survival of her family. Olsen, too, experienced disillusionment instead of the triumph she anticipated. Her early years of relentless exertion resulted in a time of fear during the period of McCarthyism. Both women outwardly demonstrate a similar overarching progression from social concern to familial concern—a relegation to domesticity.

Another strong resemblance between the two women is the intense drive they experience toward literature. Early in the text, Eva remembers herself as a “young wife, who in the deep night hours while she nursed the current baby, and perhaps held another in her lap, would try to stay awake for the only time there was to read” (Olsen, “Tell” 36). Olsen, too, feels a similar voracity for books. Laurie Olsen notes that her mother “was first and always a reader—hungry to talk about books, exchange books. . . . It was the power of the written word that she experienced as a reader that inspired . . . her to become a writer” (viii). For Olsen, reading preceded her attempts to write. She drew inspiration from the characters and experiences on the written page, and throughout her writing career, her methodology for composing included extensive reading. Although Eva never espouses a desire or need for a written self, her artistic proclivities are apparent. In Faulkner’s words, “Olsen’s writing is alive with the conviction that creativity, strength, and adaptability are far more common in women than most people think, though one’s vision has to shift to see the unconventional, sometimes desperate, manifestations of these qualities” (30). The desperate manifestation of Eva’s creativity is apparent: she possesses an innate, irrepressible drive toward the written word. Amidst the drafts of “Tell Me a Riddle,” a handwritten note states, “And they played ‘Death and Transfiguration,’” in seeming reference to Eva’s death.² “Death and Transfiguration” depicts an artist experiencing deathbed visions, a reality strikingly applicable to Eva (“Tod”). Thus, she is perhaps the stifled artist—one who might be a producer if circumstances provided the elements necessary for creative output.

While Eva and Olsen are strikingly alike, they are significantly different. Unlike Olsen, Eva has been subdued into a monolithic identity and relegated to domesticity and, ultimately, death, as seen in the previous close reading. Literary critic Helge Nilsen articulates that Eva's story "suggests that she has paid a price that is too high, that traditional motherhood is a burden that stunts the development of a woman's talents and faculties... For [Eva]... the responsibility for home and children has been a total one..." (164). Nilsen's conclusion remains consistent with the notion of Eva as a stifled artist. All that she could have been—the potential culmination of her youthful trajectory—has been thwarted by the demands of family. Faulkner notes that Olsen's use of the language of food and hunger suggests "that motherhood as defined and structured in patriarchal society starves mothers by absorbing them body and spirit" (45). Similarly, Andrés delineates how Eva's physical ailments lend metaphorical depth to her oppression, relaying that Eva is "in the process of progressive isolation from the world, since she is almost completely deaf and rapidly losing her eyesight" (360). Her degenerating body mirrors the degeneration of her personhood.

Eva's life has been so utterly stifled by circumstance that she desires "never again to be forced to move to the rhythms of others"; however, at least in terms of family life, this statement seems more like Olsen's guiding principle rather than her final lament (Olsen 37). While Olsen undoubtedly experienced hardship, she recurrently challenged the status quo. Hers appears to be a life of resistance, and while one may question the manifestations of that resistance, in no way does it seem fitting to claim that Olsen was not engaged in revolutionary action throughout her entire life.

Olsen's teens and twenties reveal an uncompromising dedication to her political activity and writing. Olsen underwent at least three abortions (Reid 124). Furthermore, her activism often

led to the abandonment of her first daughter, Karla. Reid notes numerous examples of Olsen's negligence. One such instance occurred in 1934 when twenty-two-year-old Olsen decided to join the San Francisco strikers. She coerced her youngest sister Yetta to come care for Karla, but Olsen's first husband, Abe, met Yetta at the station. Olsen had moved out, leaving her little sister to live alone with Abe and Karla (Reid 82). During this time, party work consumed Olsen, who slept on floors, ate irregularly, and wrote late into the night, producing political material (Reid 83). She placed highest priority on her activism, acknowledging little to no responsibility for Karla, Abe, or other family members, such as Yetta.

Olsen's disregard for Karla continued long past the initial fervor of the San Francisco strike. For over five years, Olsen used Karla's "'tummy' as an excuse for her own dereliction," managing to coerce advances on *Yonnondio* because of Karla's needed tonsillectomy and hernia operation yet continually failing to use the money for the surgeries (Reid 140). Various family members recurrently questioned Olsen's actions toward her first daughter, even giving warnings such as "become a good mother or lose Karla" (as qtd. in Reid 128).

In 1938, Olsen gave birth to her second daughter, Julie, and in 1939, she committed to being more responsible toward her family (Reid 141). Two more daughters followed: Kathie in 1943 and Laurie in 1947. In their concise 1991 biography on Olsen, Pearlman and Werlock's timeline identifies 1937 as the year Olsen "abandons work on 'Yonnondio'; devotes two decades to rearing daughters and to working numerous low-paying jobs to support the family" (xvi). Even Weber, who excoriates Olsen's portrayal of herself, acknowledges that her ability to pursue personal interests suffered from the demands of family life during the 1930s and 1940s (28). However, Pearlman and Werlock's timeline reveals a one-dimensional view of her activities. On the surface, she remains parallel to Eva—a woman in full-time service to her family, consistent

with the timeline's synopsis. Yet even during this time, Olsen's existence appears much more multifaceted than Eva's.

Throughout Reid's biography, frequent references to political and social activity reveal that Olsen was able to maintain a consistent presence outside of the immediate domestic sphere. While Olsen's commitment to become a better mother came in 1939, by early 1941 she had already shifted back toward her political and social aspirations. She was involved in the ILWU's Women's Auxiliary (Reid 143). She also volunteered for McKinley's Parent Teacher Association, typing skits and newsletters, supervising rehearsals, and organizing meetings (Reid 145). At one point, she worried, "what kind of mother are you?" yet continued to pursue political activity (as qtd. in Reid 145). Often in our current times, involvement in the PTA is construed as an obligatory activity for harried housewives, yet Olsen seems to have engaged in such activity with fervor rather than aversion. After being elected president of McKinley's PTA, she questioned herself: "is this really what you want to be a club woman? Are you building politically?" (as qtd. in Reid 145). Reid concludes that Olsen was building politically, stating that "chameleonlike, she had switched selves again, now becoming dynamo defender, not of the [Communist Party], but of women" (145). After becoming president of the PTA, she soon became president of the California CIO Ladies' Auxiliary, a member of the new CIO War Relief Committee, and a chairman of a price-rationing board (Reid 145-46). This is only a cursory overview of the various roles that Olsen held during this time, and "in the heady postwar atmosphere, she expected to continue such activities, enhance her reputation, and increase her fame" (Reid 169). Family life seemed unessential, and motherhood a mere peripheral undertaking—a reality far from Eva's.

After the end of World War II, Olsen underwent her most prominent years of traditional motherhood, yet she continued to engage in noticeable political and social activity. As president of the PTA, she took on challenges such as campaigning against bomb drills and coordinating a celebration of Kate Kennedy, the namesake of Karla's school and a woman who had "used her position in the public school system to war against ignorance" (Reid 150). Olsen's activities, although closely associated with family life, show intimate connection to the political tensions of the day. Ever determined to improve society, she "worked relentlessly with others to improve conditions in the public schools" (Pearlman, Werlock 24). Furthermore, she demonstrated explicit resistance to motherhood during this time, as if there were no form or duration of active mothering in which she desired to participate.

Throughout her life, Olsen defied various constraining forces. Weber argues that Eva's husband trained her to "subsist without activities of the mind, activities in which the protagonist has deserved to participate all along... more important, [he] has inadvertently trained her to refuse opportunities to participate in such activities once they are made available" (14). Olsen's husbands, however, did not ultimately stifle her in such noticeable ways. She seemed quite able to manage a short separation from Abe during the San Francisco strike, and her later years reveal explicit neglect of her second husband, Jack, as she frequently demanded to live apart from him and to limit their contact with each other in order to have more time for speaking, teaching, and writing.

While her involvement outside the domestic sphere and her radical treatment of family demonstrate autonomy, so, too, does her very ability to reflect on silenced people. As a speaking subject, Olsen's claim that she is a silenced writer appears grossly illogical. Had she truly been a member of the periphery, she would have been unable to speak and to be heard. Abigail Martin

claims that “in a very dramatic, very poignant way, *Silences* is Tillie Olsen,” yet such commentary reflects the nature of Olsen’s portrayal of herself rather than actuality (11). As such, *Silences* remains a controversial text. Most consider her intentions commendable; however, regardless of her motives, the text itself proves her own ability to articulate a message, rendering her anything but a silenced woman. Coupled with the fact that publishers throughout her life recurrently provided the economic means for production, the text does not seem applicable to her own life despite the fact that she claims it to be. While she does well to outline such silences, a level of latent hypocrisy draws attention away from those experiencing true silence and toward herself. She claims silencing despite her history of writing. For Eva, external constraints disallow the germination of her artistic proclivities; for Olsen, something else seems to be at work.

Contra Eva, Olsen’s place of prominence allows even her silence to become a text—a message meaningfully communicated to others. Weber notes, “It is that insoluble essence of the writer that makes possible the literary text of silence. Silent writers remain authors even if they never write again. What they don’t publish constitutes a literary product. Conversely, the critical attention paid to an author’s silence serves as proof of the categorical prominence of the author in our culture” (2). As Weber notes, Olsen remained an esteemed and sought-after author even when she was not authoring anything. Especially after writing *Silences*, Olsen’s lasting legacy lay in her nonwriting.

Consequently, although Eva and Olsen share similarities, Olsen’s various intellectual, political, and leadership roles demonstrate a reality far removed from Eva’s. Olsen consistently engaged in social and intellectual activity. While she was undoubtedly stifled by the demands of motherhood in the years directly following WWII, she did not ultimately succumb to the identity imposed upon her; instead, she reacted even more strongly against patriarchal constraints. While

Eva continues in her role as homemaker, Olsen's later years reveal an intense desire to prioritize her activism and writing over the needs and desires of her family. Eva, however, does not escape from her containment; long after her children have become self-sufficient, she silently battles with the dirt and the dust, thus confirming the totality to which she has been absorbed into the patriarchal framework.

Although both women display similar attributes, they exhibit differing trajectories. Stifled by familial responsibility and economic hardship, Eva emerges as a victim of the exploitative systems that surround her. She represents a reality that Olsen sought to avoid in her own life, namely, the denial of both activism and artistry through the imprisoning patriarchal family structure. Olsen may have felt a kinship to Eva, yet Olsen's life was characterized by her overarching refusal to subjugate her desires to the needs of family.

In *Silences*, Olsen claims that "where the gifted among women (*and men*) have remained mute, or have never attained full capacity, it is because of circumstances, inner or outer, which oppose the needs of creation" (17). This oblique reference to inner circumstances is significant amidst a text that highlights the evils of external constraints. While Olsen acknowledges the possibility of internal constraints, she does not provide further elaboration. As such, Olsen's radical action combined with her consistent rejection of agency is a topic worthy of further consideration. Olsen acted out of a different historical reality than Eva, and her actions testify to her possession of greater political, moral, and personal autonomy.³ While Olsen undoubtedly experienced much hardship, she reveals herself to be capable of challenging the status quo. Eva, on the contrary, is incapable of acting according to her own principles and eventually capitulates entirely in her adoption of societal norms. This reality illuminates a larger issue.

The sense of fracture that Eva demonstrates is also reflected in Olsen's own life. Despite the attention Olsen generated in her nonwriting, nonwriting was never her intent. This then becomes problematic. At almost every turn, Olsen rejected mainstream cultural dictates. She consistently resisted the laws against abortion, the legalities of book contracts, the needs and demands of her husbands and family, and the appeals from her extended family. If she could so easily dismiss outside pressures in favor of her own agenda, why did she not experience a greater sense of fulfillment than Eva?

Failure to produce constituted perhaps her greatest source of anguish and regret. Reid notes that Olsen, who suffered from Alzheimer's, may have experienced loss beginning in her fifties (333). Yet by her fifties, Olsen had long since established patterns of non-production, despite her constant desire to be a writer above all else. Among her drafts of "Tell Me a Riddle," a typewritten note describes her distress: "I had not dared look at this since last spring when I had to leave it. I find copying this too painful, first because it is so flawed[,] not far enough along in the writing for exposure, but mostly because I want to go back and ~~finish it~~ be left with this again" (TOP 2.3). Olsen could not come to terms with nonwriting. A reminder of her intense frustration and dread reads "Today – one of those days when the pain of it crumples me up that I am not writing – and the old fear, that it will never be" (TOP 16.25). Later, she would write "my hunger for writing destroys my life" (TOP 16.20). A 2007 obituary quotes Olsen as stating, "I'm going to be one of those unhappy people who dies with the sense of what never got written, or never got finished" ("Tillie Olsen," *The Herald*). And what truly were the reasons that Olsen had left her writing? She credits circumstances, particularly motherhood, yet why had she, a woman who seemed to defy expectation at every turn, been unable to defy whatever inhibitors kept her from writing?

It is my contention that Olsen could not escape or attempt to circumvent the effects of these inhibitors largely because she herself was unable to fully comprehend them. At various times, Olsen professed frustration over her inability, yet she often hedged around the possibility that perhaps something within her was hindering production. In a letter regarding a publishing contract she wrote, “A sorry stupid (unnecessarily) wasteful three month since I was in your office” (TOP 4.9). Yet this confession of guilt is lessened by the handwritten arrow and addition of “(your fault!)” above the sentence (TOP 4.9). While it remains unclear what exactly Olsen meant by her parenthetical reference to the recipient’s fault, such an accusation remains consistent with her lifelong deferring of blame.

Her own comments throughout the years, however, implicate her. At times, she herself admits the absurdity of years of nonproduction. In one comment, she states “wasted years—insane—should have believed in myself then. . . if I look at it from the power within me, the need for my writing, it all seems senseless and stupid to have wasted another 2 years” (TOP 16.25). Thus, Olsen herself was seeking reasons for her unlikely silence. To her, too, it seemed unnecessary. The following comment begins with typical lamentations regarding circumstances as inhibitors; only toward the end do her words reveal a slightly different bent: ⁴

not a moment to sit down and think – that death of the creative process
that time of anesthesia just as soon not come to consciousness how was it
that it was taken from me, it was my life
...
suffered too much ever the deferring, surviving the interruptions

never again able as I did those first two years [to] carry the writing within
me through the work the clamor the interruptions the demands lost that
kind of strength wore myself out with that terrible triple life

the torment of weariness all that came and used me. (TOP 16.20)

At the beginning, Olsen recognizes her life as “taken” from her; at the very end, she recognizes “all that came and used” her (TOP 16.20). Olsen’s use of the passive voice and indefinite subjects appears quite commonly in her lamentations about her inability to write. As such, the forces of oppression always appear external, yet her claims retain a sort of vague uncertainty. The penultimate line presents a divergent declaration, perhaps another manifestation of her ambivalence about the true cause of her inability: “wore myself out with that terrible triple life” (TOP 16.20). Although the “I” is indeed omitted, given Olsen’s use of a reflexive pronoun, we can understand “I” as the understood subject of the sentence. Gone is the passive voice, and finally, Olsen positions herself as the doer of the action. In addition to Olsen’s slippage in syntax (for it does appear that she is accidentally implicating herself; the opening and closing of this passage are too pointed to read it otherwise), it is notable that she acknowledges her triple life. She does not provide a direct reference, but it seems logical to think of her statement as referring to artistry, activism, and motherhood. Historically, these three components best describe the makeup of her life.

In admitting this three-way split, Olsen simultaneously stimulates questions regarding why she had this divided life. Such questions defy simplistic answers—or even the typical blaming of circumstances. As a woman with few qualms about abortion, why did she have such a

large family—or any family at all? What compelled her to devote countless hours to organizing, agitating, and writing on behalf of various political and governmental organizations? What incited her to write fiction, never allowing her peace apart from composing?

The answer to the last question seems most obvious, for more so than with motherhood or activism, Olsen seems to have had an innate drive toward language. Her writing proclivities manifested themselves at a young age without coercion. She felt free to play with language, enjoying rhymes and puns, and many of her early works reveal distinct artistic genius. Language appears to have arisen organically, and from its first appearance, she seemed intent on employing this talent.

The reasons for Olsen's turn toward activism and the seemingly unwanted role of mother seem far more complex than those surrounding her desire for artistry. Her early politicization by family members primed her for involvement in the YCL. As such, it's relatively easy to comprehend how she was swept up in the Communist movement. Her leap to motherhood, however, seems even more difficult to comprehend in light of her desire for activism. In no way did Olsen seem intent on conforming to mainstream America. What then led to motherhood? The answer to this question, and the answer to many of the questions about external, stifling circumstances, involves her ideological commitments—commitments which she developed in adolescence, confirmed in adulthood, and never managed to escape.

THE EFFECTS OF IDEOLOGY

Olsen's ideological commitments are complex, and as such, they resist singular classification as either positive or negative. In many ways, her work is indebted to the influence of the YCL and CP-USA. The passion and principles that she acquired in adolescence and early adulthood carried over into her later work in the Feminist movement. Both the Communist and the Feminist

movements stimulated and nurtured her uncompromising vision for humanity, abhorrence of oppression, and determination to impact the world. However, the merits brought an underside as well. For as with all ideologies, adherents are vulnerable to blindness and destructive action. Olsen, it seems, was no exception. Throughout her life, she exhibited various Marxist principles, and while her intent was commendable, she fell victim to the narrowness of constraining ideology in many ways. The following sections will explore the ways in which Olsen's philosophical beliefs ultimately led to her shift in form and content, expectation of support, failure to protect the private sphere, and pursuit of motherhood.

Shift in Form and Content

Discussion about the relationship of art and politics abounded during Olsen's adolescence, and she was undoubtedly familiar with the central issues of the American Left literary milieu, as Coiner notes ("Better" 15). Although Olsen would have known about the ongoing debates, it remained a male domain. During the early '30s, Leon Trotsky and Michael Gold, among others, had much to say about the possibilities of proletarian literature. Coiner sees Olsen as "oscillating between versions of literary orthodoxy and heterodoxy," thereby "[complicating] the schema that have generally been used to map the literary Left during this period" ("Better" 15). She writes that "Olsen embodied, during the '30s, both a commitment to the Communist Party and an emerging feminist critique of its androcentrism" (Coiner, "Better" 15). While Olsen did seek to bring female experience to the forefront, she was accepting of many of the major tenets of Party thought. In fact, whether due to alluring possibility or burgeoning responsibility, Olsen turned away from her profuse adolescent writing to pursue literature that held greater social effect—literature that was allegedly more meaningful and relevant to the times. This was a major shift for Olsen, who in her childhood practiced puns and modeled her efforts after great poets. In a

letter likely sent to Harriet Monroe of *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse*, nineteen-year-old Olsen explained her changing philosophy:

I send you a few poems of the first eighteen years of my life. I am pregnant. Those days are past. . . . I leave concern with wistful emotion and technique to those esoteric souls whom beauty makes so gay, they can forget the world they live in.

Some days ago I picked up a recent issue of *Poetry*. Who could guess from the smug insides that it was 1932. That there were millions starving, that epic forces were being unleashed in Russia and China, even – that there were automobiles. Nothing was alive but the sad statement of *Poetry*'s precarious financial condition. Thin, fretful wailing, and they have the guts to call themselves poets.

But mine are written in the same thin ink for blood. The 'modern' poets that I loved so, betrayed me. I thought poetry a fragile lady. Forgetting this past year, which of the 200 odd poems written since I was fourteen arise from the soil in which I was rooted? Perhaps one. (TOP 16.3)

This letter reveals dissatisfaction with the content of a particular art form and a consequent turning away from mainstream culture. Additionally, it reveals regret. Discontentment with her past content led her to seek out the stories of the soil around her, as demonstrated in each of her works. Olsen may lament the type of compositions she created early in her life, yet she was most productive in her adolescence, at least in terms of volume. In the letter, her references to foregoing "wistful emotion" and "technique" show a distinct connection to the literary theory of

the Left (TOP 16.3). To those on the Left, emotional explorations were bourgeois and unacceptable for individuals engaged in social revolt and reform. The merits of “technique” were highly contested: some, such as Gold, articulated the emergence of new forms; others, such as Trotsky, imagined a refashioning of mainstream techniques. Olsen’s contempt for technique is a reiteration of Party philosophy.

The literary Left influenced Olsen in many positive ways; however, its innovative philosophy brought limitations as well. Critics encouraged veteran and new writers alike to exhibit social consciousness rather than bourgeois concerns over form and style. As Daniel Aaron writes, “the Communist writer avoided rhetorical flourishes... and embraced unshrinkingly the hard facts of his times and culture” (164). Before the Popular Front era, editors and organizers exuded strong pressure on writers to produce in accordance with the dictums of the literary Left, for “if Communism were not a religion, it nonetheless had its bible and its saints”; furthermore, “its initiates exhibited all of the classic patterns of conversion in the process of being reborn, and the party-church, having discovered ‘truth,’ ruthlessly rooted out the dubious and the heterodox” (Aaron 259). The Party conditioned writers to follow its precepts in order to bring publication, praise, and consequent social transformation. In 1926, following the launching of *The New Masses*, no writer on the Left “fussed and worried over, exhorted, and admonished the uncommitted liberal artist more than Mike Gold” (Aaron 162). Yet Gold was still only one of many who had ideas about an artist’s responsibility to social transformation. In September of 1930, *New Masses* printed the nine elements that would comprise Gold’s anticipated new literary form, proletarian realism. In the article, Gold instructs writers to describe their work with technical precision and to focus on the “real conflicts” of working men and women (206). He urged writers to courageously use the material of their own experience,

instructing that “if one is a tanner and a writer, let one dare to write the drama of a tannery; or of a clothing shop, or of a ditch-digger’s life, or of a hobo” (Gold 207). This encouragement seems to increase rather than decrease possibilities for literature.

Yet according to this philosophy, the exploration of one’s own experience must never be for trivial or aesthetic reasons. One passage states that:

Proletarian realism is never pointless. It does not believe in literature for its own sake, but in literature that is useful, has a social function. Every major writer has always done this in the past; but it is necessary to fight the battle constantly, for there are more intellectuals than ever who are trying to make literature a plaything. Every poem, every novel and drama, must have a social theme, or it is merely confectionery. (Gold 206-207).

As literature intended to initiate social change, lengthy prose or unnecessary description were unacceptable; proletarian realism demanded conciseness. Gold articulates that “we are not interested in the verbal acrobats—this is only another form for bourgeois idleness” (207).

Instead, there must be “swift action, clear form, the direct line, cinema in words” (Gold 207).

Such a goal seems more idealistic than realistic.

Many of the necessary elements seem vague and perhaps contradictory. Striving to create cinema in words while avoiding bourgeois idleness is a steep task. Furthermore, the article calls for “revolutionary elan” to accompany portrayals of the “horror and drabness” of workers’ lives (Gold 207). Such a balance would be difficult to attain, especially when writers must eliminate “straining or melodrama or other effects” (Gold 208). Gold wrote that “life itself is the supreme

melodrama,” and he instructed writer to “feel this intensely, and everything becomes poetry” (208). This call to feel life in order to produce meaningful literature reveals a belief that action and experience must foreground all attempts at writing. In the announcement for a new writing program, Gold instructed writers to attach themselves to an industry for several years in order to become experts who could write as insiders (Aaron 213). Thus, oppressive realities provide not only the urgency for literature that propels social change, but also the inspiration.

The Left was by no means united in its espousal of the above precepts; however, the most vocal agitators were in agreement. Some critics, such as Kenneth Burke, accepted the Party schema with conditions. He believed that art during that time period needed to contain “a large *corrective* or *propaganda* element” and that “it must have a definite hortatory function, an element of suasion and/or inducement of the education variety; it must be partially forensic” (as qtd. in Aaron 289). Still others resisted the whole concept. For instance, Joseph Wood Krutch felt that “no genuine writer. . . could submit himself to a political religion that demanded undeviating fidelity to a set of doctrines and that regarded art as a weapon” (Aaron 259). He asserted that art “is essentially a form of rationalized and extended Contemplation, designed primarily to render more vivid and assimilable those experiences which are capable of being enjoyed for their own sakes,” a task which required “disinterestedness” (as qtd. in Aaron 259). From 1936 to 1937, debate regarding proletarian realism disappeared from *The New Masses* (Coiner, “Better” 29). By 1939, Philip Rahv and William Phillips, the dominant critics of *Partisan Review*, would conclude that “the Left’s most serious error had been its decade-long presumption that the artist would improve both his mind and his work by entering the political world” (as qtd. in Coiner, “Better” 32). Olsen, however, never came to such definitive conclusions.

The polemical nature of Olsen's texts lessened throughout her life, yet she never fully stopped adhering to the Left's stringent guidelines. Long after her Party involvement ceased, her work continued to reflect commitments to proletarian realism. Only in her pre-Party years did she treat literature as a plaything, gaining pleasure from the sheer joy of arranging words into humorous sentences or clever poetry. Much of Olsen's early work employs a first-person point-of-view, centering on emotions and personal anguish. After entering the Party, social themes dominated her compositions. She developed an unerring commitment to literature that reveals the intimate details of tragedy, and her published texts illuminate the plights of everyday individuals in meaningful, moving ways. The dramatic shift in her content and the consequent perseverance of her commitment demonstrate her deep-seated desire to produce literature that participates in the righting of social wrongs.

As many of Olsen's texts center on motherhood and female experience, she thereby does bring attention to unappreciated labor, but not perhaps in the way that Gold originally envisioned. She strove for precision in her portrayals of domestic life. While Party union activity centered primarily on male industries, she addressed the "physiological and sexual experiences that shape women's lives—sexual initiation, pregnancy, childbirth, miscarriage, sterilization, battery, rape—at a time when these topics seldom appeared in literature" (Coiner, "Tell" 78). Not only did Olsen draw heavily on her own experience, she also zealously promoted the cause of the unrepresented and unappreciated, thereby writing about the unacknowledged realities that surrounded her. The Left's charge to write about one's own experience provided justification for Olsen to engage women's issues. Despite the gendered nature of the Left literary circles, Olsen found justification in the Left's own philosophies to bring consideration to previously unexamined areas of life. As such, her radical actions seem to have grown from the Left's

encouragement. She desired readers to understand the intricacies of life that surrounded women in much the same way Gold anticipated raising awareness of the intricacies surrounding male workers.

Despite the originality of Olsen's work, each work is inarguably polemical, which further reveals her internalization of the Left's literary theory. *Yonnondio*, her first attempt at a novel, is fascinating both as a piece of art and as the beginning of what she intended to be a scathing critique of Capitalist exploitation in the 1930s. While Olsen did not finish the text, her plans reveal an explicit political intent, thus testifying to her deep-seated belief that literature can and must propel social progress. In the short story collection *Tell Me a Riddle*, Olsen reveals a less strict adherence to Party precepts. But as I noted in my close reading on Eva, the text centers on social issues, thereby further demonstrating Olsen's longstanding commitments.

Human conflict is at the forefront of Olsen's work. Given her focus on women, she imagines the conflicts and experiences of the working class from a distinctly woman- and family-focused point of view. Even the exploration of Whitey's alcoholism in "Hey Sailor, What Ship?" arises through family interactions. This evokes Coiner's conclusion that Olsen was both committed to the literary theory of the Left as well as radically opposing its androcentrism. Olsen reimagined how the precepts might apply to the most unacknowledged areas of human experience.

All of Olsen's stories, despite the intensity of the tragedy she depicts, simultaneously carry positive aspects, perhaps her intent to capture both the horror and the optimism that proletarian realism demands. The hopeful aspects of "Tell Me a Riddle" are Eva's resilient spirit and Jeannie's potential. In the drafts, Olsen reminds herself, "you are writing of a human being not a god not of perfection not of all wisdom" (TOP 1.14). She thus appears intent on

crafting a protagonist who is a genuine person, rather than an idealized heroine. Olsen certainly attempted to better understand the pain of others, as demonstrated in her incessant reading, yet the Left's exhortation to exclude melodrama or straining seems rather vague. As such, it seems that writers would have a difficult time striving to fulfill the demands of the form while avoiding the various pitfalls.

Far from an open, free space that promotes creation, such an atmosphere likely stifled the possibility of production. Numerous individuals may have been writing, but in attempting to fit a particular mold, they were thereby denying personal proclivities. This then is an ironic paradox: while the Left sought to illuminate the individual experience, their prescriptive dictates inevitably limited the range of composition. Instead of heralding all as writers, the Left heralded all as a particular type of writer with a particular type of content and purpose. In many ways, these literary limitations may have greatly contributed to Olsen's intensive process and her consequent small output.

Despite the beauty of her prose, Olsen failed to create lengthy texts. *Yonnondio* remains an unfinished novel, and although Olsen intended to expand "Tell Me a Riddle," she was never able to accomplish it. Only through intensive labor and painstaking process did Olsen produce what she did. Throughout her writing career, she refined and redacted texts, eliminating pages that she considered unessential. While she never appears to give explicit reference to the Party's influence on her regarding this practice, it seems likely that it did impact her methodology. The literary theory of the Left demanded concision, and Olsen's arduous process testifies to her uncompromising commitment to succinct, purposeful writing. Her seemingly unending revisions demonstrate her desire to portray exactly what she intends in the most precise way possible, a position she likely adopted during her time with the CP-USA.

Overarching concern for social justice is one of the most enduring aspects of Olsen's work, and the Communist movement ultimately encouraged Olsen to write; however, the various stipulations about "good" and "productive" literature inevitably restricted her writing freedom. For *Yonnondio*, Olsen had a grand vision planned: the husband would become involved in a strike, experience failure, and consequently abandon the family; the mother would then die trying to self-abort because she could not bear the burden of another child. Reid notes that Olsen's 1935 plan for completion "subsumed plot to ideology" (347). Perhaps the narrow expectations of the Left contributed to Olsen's inability to bring her prescriptive, grand scheme to fruition. It is notable that Olsen produced much more in her youth, when her texts often involved trite and seemingly less important aspects of life, such as love and her own emotions. The Left taught Olsen to value a particular type of literature. As such, the convictions Olsen developed as part of the Communist Party likely deterred production.

Olsen felt such a strong need to tell the stories of others, yet this need appears almost as a burden. Did this burden hinder as much as it compelled? In her later years, Olsen wrote, "I should be writing all the time 'sense of responsibility to what you were born and intended to do'" (TOP 16.25). She often wrote or spoke about unwritten stories: amid her papers, the following phrases appear: "who will write about shorty or about alice or about nick" (16.25) and "who will write about them if I do not" (TOP 16.21). Such a responsibility—to reveal the experiences of others in a meaningful way—may have been as crippling for Olsen as it was rewarding. Typewritten words reveal an Olsen who at one point at least considered the possibility of changing her methodology: "maybe I am going to have to abandon the kind of pain with which I wrote before—maybe it is more important to record it than how well I seem to say it" (TOP 16.25). The date of Olsen's comment remains unknown. Before depositing her papers

at Stanford, she provided dates for various pieces, yet given the time that had expired since creation to the dating (and Olsen's tendency to fabricate), these dates are useful but not necessarily accurate. Furthermore, on this particular paper, Olsen originally scrawled a date which looks to be "1966" before then writing over it with "1954" (TOP 16.25). Based on the haphazard nature of the writing, the piece most resembles Olsen's later work. If so, perhaps she realized too late the possibility of changing her process—or if it did originate in the 1950s, perhaps Olsen never seriously considered the possibility she raised. Throughout her writing years, her convictions about art disallowed what she deemed as bourgeois experimentation or personal gratification. On the contrary, she felt that all art needed to be of utmost importance, dealing with great struggles and social problems. Such a view meant that no attempt at creation could be approached lightly. This philosophical viewpoint would be detrimental, a psychological pitfall, to anyone who fully internalized it.

Given Olsen's commitments, she intended each text to be a major achievement. Intent on crafting the best possible texts, Olsen wrote heavily, eventually redacting and eliminating everything that seemed unessential. In the drafts of "Tell Me a Riddle," she tells herself, "still do it and then cut if you must is it valuable is it needed what will it add? Or is it repetition" (TOP 1.14). While asking such questions remains beneficial writing practice, Olsen demonstrated extreme manifestations of composing and cutting material. According to Olsen, "Tell Me a Riddle" was the result of six years' labor. Regarding the four-story collection *Tell Me a Riddle*, she claims that she wrote "several thousand pages at least" (TOP 42.2). In an interview, she revealed, "I seem to have to repeat and go back and get some things perfect enough to be able to go on. All I know is that it takes me a long time, and I climb walls and keep hoping for facility and it hasn't happened yet, and my writing is very, very bad in the beginning. You

wouldn't believe how sloppy and trite and everything else it is. It takes me a long long time" (TOP 42.2). Was Olsen's painstaking process the result of her deep-seated belief that each work was supposed to be a social breakthrough? Such self-imposed pressure likely would cripple even the most talented writer.

While Olsen's work remains indebted to Communist precepts, we have no way of knowing the extent to which Party philosophy limited the range or quantity of her compositions. After making her initial break from bourgeois writing, Olsen never returned to a state of mind where literature could be a plaything. The nature of art, however, often demands the organic, unforced rise of genius. Unable to disconnect from the internalized rhetoric, Olsen never fully relinquished her belief in the distinctions between meaningful and meaningless art. Always striving for a masterwork with direct bearing on social issues, she failed to comprehend how all art has the potential to subvert dominant power structures and to critique society.

Expectation of Support

In addition to the limitations of the expected literary form, Communism also indoctrinated Olsen with certain expectations about production and financial support. Reid provides an insightful summary of Olsen's life, stating that:

Early star power . . . had encouraged overconfidence and excused a lack of discipline. Then the Communist Party spoiled her as much as her parents had. Party members disregarded bourgeois values and encouraged her to conceptualize through ideology. . . . The grants she began winning in the 1950s, along with the advances . . . spoiled her. Once again a residue of party ideology was the culprit. [She] believed that, after the insults and deprivations she suffered through during

the Depression and the McCarthy years, she was entitled to be kept by foundations and artists' colonies. (332-333)

The reality Reid presents is problematic, for although Olsen was a victim of star power and indoctrination (the external constraints specific to her own context), she seems to have willingly allowed these things to have bearing on her reality, never realizing the extent that her philosophical commitments were hindering her ability to produce.

Always she blamed her nonwriting on circumstances that hindered rather than her decision to engage in other peripheral activities. In reflecting on Olsen's life, Reid summarizes that "Tillie often spoke of being a partially destroyed human being, blaming years of doing others' typing for her painstaking writing method" (333). Yet despite hardship, opportunity consistently arose. Olsen's lamentations are especially interesting given the numerous writing contracts, awards, and fellowships that she received throughout her life. These sources of money should have allowed her years to write. During the time when Olsen was taking advances on *Yonnondio*, she did not live an opulent life. She also did not use the advances to cover Karla's surgeries. Consequently, Reid believes it likely that Olsen fed the YCL coffers (110). Such action, if it is true, only further proves the extent to which Communist philosophy ultimately hindered Olsen.

The enigma regarding Olsen's financial practices undermines her years of lamentation, as Party ideology likely conditioned her to contribute her advances to the movement and to consequently expect more funding as if it truly were her right as an artist. Whether or not donating is the reason that Olsen's money dwindled so quickly, mismanagement and a failure to maximize opportunity is apparent. While I am not seeking to discredit the very real nature of

Olsen's hardship, it is interesting to consider the varying trajectory she may have experienced if early on in her career she had used advances to support her writing efforts, as the publishing companies intended—or if later in life, she had protected her time and actually wrote, as the grant- and fellowship-giving institutions expected.

Olsen never seemed to realize that received funds were contingent upon actual production. Reid notes that Olsen “was an easily distracted procrastinator” whose “squabbling over what she had already written kept her from writing new works” (Reid 333). Furthermore, “laudable activities like researching history, rereading favorite books, and writing burbs for friends also kept her from writing,” as did her exhausting lecture tours (Reid 133). These details hint at a deeper problem. Conditioned to believe that supporting artists was the responsibility of a society, Olsen never learned to manage the funds she did receive or to realize her obligation to honor the intent behind the financial support. Somehow, the funds meant to provide support for her writing never managed to lead to much production. This stands in stark contrast to the many writers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries who found time for composing despite extenuating circumstances and without benefit of any financial support—among them, Rebecca Harding Davis, whose work had a profound effect upon Olsen. These writers testify to the possibility of creation without resources and amid great obstruction.

Olsen's outlook, however, greatly hindered her ability to maximize the resources available to her. Despite receiving uncommon benefits, she produced far less than both publishers and she herself expected. Toward the end of her life, she continued to request funds to produce books, even when she privately expressed her horror at being no longer able to write. Perhaps these requests were motivated by her internal longing to write, or perhaps they, too, demonstrate her lasting belief that artists deserve the support of society by merit of their

profession. Either way, her philosophy of entitlement led to unsustainable financial practices throughout her life.

Failure to Protect the Private Sphere

In addition to its stipulations about quality writing, the Party also conditioned Olsen to recognize action as more valuable than contemplation. Coiner notes that some of Olsen's journal entries reflect "the movement's tendency to value action over deliberation and introspection" ("Better" 154). Olsen herself testifies to the extent that she felt this pressure. In "The Strike," Olsen captures her urge to be amid the fray of resistance rather than writing on the periphery. In the text, writing is passive and seemingly less potent than joining the strikers. Given Olsen's consistent prioritization of activism, this urge seems to be real rather than fictionalized. For instance, in November of 1935, after living with a wealthy friend due to financial trouble, Olsen left the house and "forsook bourgeois pleasures. She abandoned her writing career," becoming "born-again into the party" (Reid 114). With "her redemption as writer, wife, and mother long behind her," Olsen even typed a letter giving Karla to relatives as long as they agreed to raise her on Communist precepts (Reid 114). Such strong philosophical commitment helps clarify why Olsen often engaged in action to the detriment of her writing.

Even when Olsen shifted focus to the Feminist movement, she still failed to elevate writing over lecturing. Such habits inescapably lessened her capacity for artistic creation. As Olsen often lamented, art does not arise upon bidding but requires germination. Constantly filling her schedule with public appearances, Olsen did not protect her private sphere. Her failure to do so was intimately tied to her dedication to promoting the communal and denying the individual, another belief inherited from Communism.

Olsen's work reveals an unwavering valorization of the communal realm and hostility toward the individual realm. Always the needs of humanity exclude all justification for personal pursuit; consequently, she criticized all action not directly concerned with humanity as selfish and reprehensible. This then results in an illogical division between noble and ignoble action. Olsen justified her radical actions as necessary because of collective need. While her philosophical commitments slightly shifted throughout her life, they always maintained a distinct affinity to this foundational Party precept. Party leader Eugene Debs, an active member for 50 years, describes the faith placed in the Party as a "lifetime commitment of Self not to oneself but to a collective activism governed and controlled by a structured organization that commanded total allegiance" (as qtd. in Coiner, "Better" 8). Such thinking clearly informed Olsen's perspective, for years later she still adhered to notions of collective activism despite the failure of the CP-USA. Throughout her life, she heralded the importance of each person's responsibility to humanity, and she continued to conflate individual pursuit with American notions of selfish and exploitative individualism.

Such strong emphasis on the communal amid constant laments about her own reality illustrates a striking paradox. As such, Olsen's work and life provide ample opportunity to investigate the dichotomy between the communal and the individual. Olsen's idealistic and alluring principles stemmed from Communist thought, and although her intent seemed commendable, the dichotomies she accepted are insupportable and constraining. While Marxism largely encouraged Olsen toward writing, followers still viewed action as more potent than writing. Marxist rhetoric conditioned Olsen to see writing for writing's sake as bourgeois. Literature was useful to the extent that it drew attention to social atrocities and heralded the possibility of revolutionized societies. Although Olsen believed adherence to such principles

would bring fulfillment, her life demonstrated the inherent error in such thinking. Especially in the latter part of her life, Olsen revealed regret over her personal actions—specifically, over her inability to write that which “seethed, bubbled, clamored” within her (Olsen, *Silences* 20). Even when not writing, Olsen was continually engaged in righting social wrongs, yet she never lamented her inability to engage in more public work; rather, she did lament not being able to engage in the personal and private act of composition—an activity that from her early youth brought intense personal fulfillment.

Tensions between the communal and the individual haunt Olsen’s pages. Olsen constructed intricate portraits of individuals and their respective needs; however, she explicitly endorsed the needs of the community over the needs of the individual. In “Tell Me a Riddle,” Eva expresses horror at the atrocities suffered communally by various groups. She notes the Jews’ suffering and the destruction of the Japanese after the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Her ponderings lead her to wonder whether mankind will destroy itself. Thus, although she moves from specific to general, from groups to all of humanity, her own story radically opposes this type of thinking. Her own suffering is a personal suffering: an unknown, silenced anguish. She vicariously feels the horror of the brutal times, yet her own situation garners little sympathy—even from her own family. Only upon the revelation of her cancer does she receive compassion from her family based on being part of recognizable groups: she is both a cancer victim and a member of the dying. Before she had a diagnosable problem, her actual, concrete problems go unnoticed.

Fulfillment and selfhood remain central to Olsen’s texts, philosophies, and actions. Continually, she drew awareness to the realities, needs, and desires of individual people. On a note card, she outlined “what to truly value, honor” for “you who carry on the world” (TOP

12.10). Among “USSR?” and “roots,” she included “the tragedy of unfulfilled aims” (TOP 12.10). In the drafts of “Tell Me a Riddle,” Olsen explicitly wrote that Eva’s plight concerns “all that surged up—all that was never fulfilled” (TOP 2.3). Olsen envisioned Eva before motherhood as “intact—no seeking, searching, beyond outside oneself but a self—then ceasing to be, tending to others, pulling, tearing, feeding on the heart” (TOP 2.4). Such comments draw attention to Eva as an individual person with individual needs and desires. As Faulkner states,

The important difference between Olsen and many of her contemporaries lies rather in her conception of how the self flowers. In Olsen’s work, selfhood is never for the self alone, but always for the self and the community. Without community, each person is caught up in competition, hermetically sealed away from compassion, and denied the full range of human feeling and activity. . . . as long as self-fulfillment is defined in individualistic terms, the winter continues, with only a fortunate few escaping to more gentle climates. (82)

Olsen’s unerring beliefs in the benefits of communal action and evils of individualism did not exclude a belief in the possibility of positive benefits for the individual. Thus paradoxically, Olsen’s activist pursuits seem to be attempts to achieve both social progress and personal fulfillment. One of her many handwritten quotations reads, “biological evolutionary need to fulfill self thru serving others” (TOP 12.13). She doesn’t seem to condemn the notion of self-realization, but merely the route taken in search of such ends. While her emphasis on collective humanity is part of her lasting legacy, she nevertheless fails to delineate a clear space for the individual, including herself.

Further contradiction arises in her conception of the communal as it pertains to family. Friedman believes that “to focus only on one’s own needs and interest while ignoring our legitimate responsibilities to others, arising out of the relationships in which we find ourselves embedded and on which those others depend, is to exhibit an excessive individualism that is morally culpable” (54). Olsen asserted an individual’s responsibility to the collective whole, yet she placed little concern over an individual’s responsibility to those in the immediate sphere, such as the nuclear family. In service of what she deemed to be the greater good, she often disregarded the needs of those to whom she had made commitments. Feminists who herald an ethics of responsibility claim that individuals are “*obligated to respond* to particular others when circumstances or ongoing relationships render them especially, conspicuously, or peculiarly dependent on us” (Friedman 64). Olsen’s children certainly depended upon her, yet she consistently justified neglect of family due to her greater communal pursuits.

Never did Olsen explicitly identify motherhood as a form of communal service, even when highlighting its many merits. Her vision of the communal did not include her parents, siblings, husband, or four daughters. Superficially, Olsen maintained a strong distinction between the communal and the individual, and she used this to justify many of her actions. Clearly her own pursuits of self-realization were tied to her social activism, and by extension, to her socially conscious writing, which she hoped would initiate change. Olsen could rationalize her ethically questionable actions because she saw them as contributing to the communal whole, and while her perspective about what constituted the communal ultimately freed her from family responsibility, her perspective also seemed to limit her in the area of writing.

At a foundational level, Olsen was suspicious of writing for writing’s sake—although writing appeared to be her greatest source of joy. Since Olsen believed personal fulfillment could

only come from communal service, it becomes impossible to distinguish between selfish action and social responsibility. Her attempts to find fulfillment through narrow conceptions of communal service were misguided. While her Communist commitments allowed her to shirk responsibility to those in her immediate sphere, thereby freeing up time, the same rhetoric also conditioned her to avoid ostensibly frivolous writing. Had she conceptualized experimental and exploratory writing as compatible with her grandiose understanding of the communal and as subsequently capable of bringing fulfillment, she likely would have been able to better order her life.

Instead, deep-seated commitments to Party dictates seem to have recurrently produced guilt-motivated actions, as even her decision to have more than one child was intimately connected to her beliefs about working-class experiences and their impact on one's effectiveness in understanding, relaying, and promoting social progress. Later in life, Olsen demonstrated a stronger intent to achieve personal fulfillment; however, by that time, her aptitude for writing had decreased greatly. At one point, she conveys in jumbled excitement, "do that write now I am writing down fast letting flood the stories I have I am having a happy time more than the paragraph the note half the time I am crying with a fulfilled joy" (TOP 16.25). The fragmentary nature of the above passage is consistent with her later-life work. Her final text, *Silences*, made it to print with heavy editorial changes, yet reviewers still criticized it for its haphazard construction. If Olsen truly had begun suffering from early Alzheimer's symptoms in her 50s, then her later-life decision to pursue writing came too late. Like Eva, she was still able to espouse her desire for engaging in that which impassioned her; however, disease left her unable to act upon her longing.

Far from being negatively individualistic, Olsen's art had direct bearing on the world around her, yet she saw other activities as more important. Olsen's beautiful and decidedly political writing undoubtedly remained consistent with her communal vision, yet she did not prioritize it. The Party's espousal of action over contemplation likely did much to influence her; however, she also revealed guilt over the personal satisfaction that writing provided—as if the very fact that it nourished her individual needs rendered it a selfish indulgence.

Thus, it seems that a false distinction between the communal and individual hindered Olsen's production. Her texts undoubtedly participate in the communal good on multiple levels, and writing also simultaneously provided personal fulfillment. This reality reveals that Olsen's grand vision of communal responsibility does not exclude the possibility of self-realization. Her failure to recognize the potential compatibility of pursuing selfhood and communal progress remains one of the most regrettable aspects of her life. Speaking of Eva as a reflection of Olsen, Van Buren maintains that "Olsen/Eva reminds us of the need for solitude as a time for rediscovery of the inner self" (163). Had Olsen actively sought personal fulfillment and social justice, her small literary output and her end-of-life laments may have been drastically altered. In a journal entry from high school, Olsen wrote, "Yes, I shall be a writer. Descriptions every night. To write alone again, to live alone. To take my walks and see the city in day, in night. To closet this in me and feel it move. Only for my notebooks. And the other writing, no matter with how much pain. But only the things I love, only things I want" (TOP 16.9). Perhaps this was an Olsen already impacted by Party philosophy and therefore adopting an individualistic persona; however, no peripheral evidence suggests that this is the case. Taken at face value, it appears as the aspirations of a teenage girl: aspirations to live amid writing, not for its potential benefits to humanity, but for its personal worth.

Pursuit of Motherhood

Olsen often engaged in various undertakings, convinced of their merits because of their potential impact on the collective whole. Surprisingly, motherhood is one such example. As Reid notes, Olsen's "expectations that working in fields or factories and organizing workers" would develop her as a writer "assumed that authentic experience with the working classes was preliminary to writing and that message trumps artistry" (Reid 121). The same sort of rationalization led Olsen to motherhood. While motherhood inarguably limited her ability to pursue other activities, such as writing, her leftist philosophical beliefs had a direct impact on her initial decision to have a family and the responsibilities of domestic life that followed. After becoming pregnant for at least the fourth time, Olsen initially determined to have another abortion. Her resolve wavered, however, due to a reprint of Käthe Kollwitz's "The Mothers" that appeared in *People's World* along with Kollwitz's commentary about the "sufferings of motherhood and childhood under capitalism" (Reid 134). With this text "searing her eyes" as well as memories of her mother and Karla "searing her heart," she left the abortionist's office (Reid 134). Thus, even her turn to motherhood stems from political motivations. Reid notes that Olsen seemed to view motherhood as "redemptive" (Reid 134). When Olsen later blamed family and housework—the mundane aspects of daily living—for her inability to write, she ignored the fact that her Communist devotion undergirded her decision to embark into domesticity in the first place.

Similar political commitments informed her participation in both motherhood and activism, and Olsen's unusual venture into motherhood sparked a lifetime of conflicting messages. At times, Olsen seemed to espouse the genuine merits of motherhood. Still, she never consistently endorsed any recognizable form of mothering, which was likely due to lingering commitments about public and private action. To Olsen, it seemed that home life was a

patriarchal and individualistic realm that both hindered one from communal action and destroyed all consequent possibility of self-fulfillment. She may have believed in a theoretically positive manifestation, yet Olsen predominantly resisted motherhood throughout her life, elevating communal activity. The great harm inherent in motherhood and the great possibility of communal impact seemingly justified her actions.

Interestingly, critics often praise Olsen for providing a balanced view of motherhood. Andrés asserts that Olsen “consistently rejects giving either a romantic or nihilistic perspective on motherhood” (Andrés 361). He illustrates Olsen’s ambivalence with two excerpts from *Silences*. At one point in this text, Olsen defines motherhood as “an almost taboo area; the last refuge of sexism; what has been, is, the least understood, least and last explored, tormentingly complex *core* of women’s oppression” (*Silences* 202). Later, Olsen seemingly endorses motherhood as a source of “invaluable comprehension,” which reveals “the very nature, needs, illimitable potentiality of the human being” (*Silences* 202). Upon examination, such inconsistencies arise throughout Olsen’s work.

“Tell Me a Riddle” portrays in stark detail the negative consequences of motherhood. Rather than delineating the potential joys of mothers, it focuses on destructive elements. According to Joyce Antler, Olsen suggests that “when women live only through their families . . . they are denied their own individuality and any possibility for a larger connection to humankind” (132). Eva literally dies of cancer, yet figuratively, her selfhood is suffocated by the oppressive systems that surround her. In a world of race, class, and gender discrimination, motherhood appears as a repository of harm. Consequently, “Tell Me a Riddle” demonstrates a poignant critique of domestic motherhood, and through this depiction, Olsen exonerates her own

radical life choices. While Olsen avoids didactic solutions in “Tell Me a Riddle,” she offers little support for those who wish to herald the positive aspects of motherhood, and, truly, no positive manifestations.

Olsen’s later views, however, demonstrate her vacillation about the desirability of motherhood. Later in life, a mature and enigmatic Olsen revealed herself as explicitly pro-motherhood. On a scrap piece of paper, she instructed Coiner, at the time a graduate student, to “thieve all the time you can for Ana,” Coiner’s newborn daughter (Coiner, “Better” xi). This piece of encouragement remains consistent with Olsen’s positive commentary on motherhood and family life, including *Mother to Daughter, Daughter to Mother*, an assortment of writings Olsen compiled in an attempt to shed light on the rewarding yet complex nature of mothering.

Yet Olsen’s verbal and written affirmations of motherhood are inconsistent with her lived attitude toward family life. After World War II, during Olsen’s most intense engagement with domestic life, she chastised herself for “[relapsing] to motherhood” (as qtd. in Reid 142). This comment reveals an undercurrent of repulsion. While one can argue that Olsen is merely resistant of motherhood in a world of class, race, and gender inequity, her comment seems all-encompassing. Coiner notes that “Tell Me a Riddle” and *Silences* are “virtually unique in American writing for their uncompromising look at the anguish of women who must choose between having children and the need to carry on other serious work” (“Better” 193). Coiner thus interprets these two works as depicting motherhood as less important than other possible undertakings, thereby articulating a philosophical position that seems consistent with Olsen’s comment about motherhood as a relapse.

While Olsen has done admirably in bringing attention to motherhood and further outlining its complexity, the discontinuities between her work and life invite further discussion.

Olsen instructed Coiner to thief time for her daughter, yet Olsen largely seems to have done the opposite throughout her life. How then can we reconcile Olsen's words with her actions toward her own family? What motivated this schism between word and deed?

It seems that Olsen was once again motivated by Communist philosophy. Seeking the material of great art and kinship with the oppressed, she chose motherhood. Even in this initial decision, her ultimate goal of writing motivated her controversial action. Later Olsen would refer to "the college of motherhood," claiming that "there is a certain source sense of human life that, so far, only mothers have been able to be close to" (as qtd. in Kallet, Cofer 66). Misled by party precepts, Olsen believed that her best writing could only be accomplished through genuine understanding of human experience, despite—and perhaps largely because of—the accompanying anguish. Later in life, Olsen would praise motherhood—because it had, in fact, helped to generate some of her greatest work. The stories of *Tell Me a Riddle* likely would not have been possible had Olsen not chosen to be a mother, yet this is merely another example of how party indoctrination motivated Olsen's choices. When she would later lament the burden of motherhood, she made no mention of the reasons why she first pursued it. A comment from late in her career reads,

Distractedness, weak memory, stupidity. Days passed in futility, powers wasted away in waiting, and in spite of all this idleness, throbbing gnawing pains in my head. (Unwritten work.)

Always this one principal anguish. If I had gone away in 1912 in full possession of all my forces... not eaten by the strain of keeping down living forces. (TOP 12.16)

The last phrase perhaps references Olsen's intense identification with oppressed people, which led to her compulsion to write their stories. The date, too, seems illogical, as Olsen was born in 1912. Yet in red pen, she changed the date to "1911" before writing what appears to be "1916" in the margin. To complicate matters further, a typed "1918" also appears in the margin, but this is heavily crossed out. Despite the unusual date choice, Olsen clearly articulates her frustration with inability, and she reveals regret over her past actions. It seems unlikely that Olsen was thinking specifically of her Party involvement, yet her statement does seem strikingly individualistic, and, as such, contrary to all that Communism taught her. As her writing capacity declined, Olsen grew desperate. She determined to further relinquish familial responsibility and to focus on her writing, thereby writing with renewed fervor of her desire to compose.

Heralding a communal vision, Olsen justified her most radical actions because of their impact on the collective whole. Always she espoused that circumstances constrain and one's moral obligation to humanity forces action; never did she identify the possibility of various positive trajectories—each meaningful and productive. Throughout her life, artistry and activism appear as her chosen pathways to fulfillment; family seems merely a burden that generated regret and further hindered her work. Despite her frustration with the demands of motherhood, the same ideological commitments that disallowed her prioritization of artistry also motivated her decision to have children. Furthermore, after choosing a family, Olsen's communal vision and contempt for patriarchal constraints thus provided justification for radical, arguably reprehensible action. Faulkner believes that Olsen truly thought "mothering could be, *can* be healthy generous, curious, eager for connections, even rapturous," yet nowhere in Olsen's literature do we see her

even attempt a positive example of a woman to whom motherhood provides a consistent source of fulfillment (58). Olsen herself falls short of such a model. Ultimately, she neither provided a positive example of rapturous motherhood nor of efficacious authorship.

Olsen never realized the extent of her independence, and while she quickly—and rightfully—delineates various inhibiting factors, she nevertheless fails to identify the extent to which her own choices impacted the trajectory of her life. Olsen outlined a variety of obstacles that impeded her ability, and as Martin states,

Olsen makes her point very clearly—the great obstacle lies in the fact of *being a woman*. Throughout the centuries of a male-oriented civilization, she tells us, two factors have made it almost impossible for women to attain their maximum excellence and to be recognized as artists. They have not produced, have not achieved as much as men in the world of art, simply because they have been put down, denigrated, sneered at; they have been denied the opportunity to develop.

(13)

Despite the very real challenges of living in a patriarchal society, Olsen's initial success, and her ability to protect her image in the wake of success, demonstrate effectuality. Reid states that Olsen "reinvented herself as a *grande dame*, celebrated for performing her famous stories, rather than writing new ones" (Reid 333). Even if illness was further hindering her from production, she used the capabilities she did possess to concede rather than to work against constraints. In regard to her own life, *Silences* becomes a full endorsement of her status as silenced author, and many of its negative reviews may stem from irritation with "a certain self-pitying note that is

sounded over and over again” (Martin 16-17). Olsen speaks long enough to claim her silence, consequently instilling that silence with meaning. As such, her silence becomes a text that critics read alongside her texts. Weber notes that “if silence exists as a literary text, there must be someone generating it; for silence to be owned, there must ipso facto be an owner” (Weber 2). In the owning of her silence, Olsen calls into question the very nature of that silence and she thus provides the final word on her own defeat.

Though Olsen desired to be a writer, her ideological commitments influenced the way she pursued this goal, as she ultimately failed to consider the limitations of internal constraints. Her upbringing and surroundings conditioned her toward acquiescence, and while this at least partially exonerates her, it does little to bolster a future generation toward transcending Olsen’s situation. Despite her zeal for improving the lives of women, Olsen never focused on the effects of ideological inhibitors; consequently, she was never able to identify their effects on her own life or to posit a solution for helping other women avoid similar pitfalls.

A PORTRAIT OF HOPE

Olsen seemingly denied the possibility of autonomy and of transcending one’s circumstances. She called it “the changing, changeless lie,” composed of “the lie of choice” and the lie of “defining oneself, determining one’s own life” (TOP 12.10). Yet Olsen’s “Tell Me a Riddle” reveals possibility. Eva’s double-bind appears to leave her without option for positive resistance, and as such, she chooses her own subordination. Allen, in her analysis of Butler, concludes that the reality Butler describes—that of a subject choosing pain rather than loss of identity—“leaves open the possibility of an attachment to painless and nonsubordinating (or, at least, less painful and subordinating) modes of subjectivity” (83). Thus, Eva’s story also affirms the potential for

progressive action. She chose subordination, yet future generations have the capacity to learn from her error and perhaps avoid a similar outcome.

Despite the tragedy of Eva's life, Jeannie is the embodiment of potentiality. The text showcases Eva's entrapment within debilitating circumstances—economic struggle, domestic relegation, patriarchal oppression, and physical illness—yet Jeannie emerges as a portrait of promise, largely devoid of such limiting conditions. Jeannie, as Eva's granddaughter, stands as representative of an inheriting generation. Despite the atrocities that plague Eva, Jeannie remains seemingly healthy, economically stable, and independent. And while she is potentiality, not actuality, the way the text characterizes her positive trajectory is notable.

In a seemingly disparate scene near the end of the text, Jeannie reveals her intent to exercise her autonomy. She tells David that she is resigning her job (Olsen, "Tell" 69). David first suggests that her decision is because of a man and then suggests that the job itself is undesirable. Instead, Jeannie claims that the reason lies within her, stating, "I can't be... what they call professional enough. I let myself feel things. And tomorrow I have to report a family... It's not that, either. I just don't know what I want to do, maybe go back to school, maybe go to art school" (Olsen, "Tell" 69). In Jeannie's statement of intent and accompanying explanation, she demonstrates a radical and encouraging reality.

First, her actions are not motivated by a man. While Jeannie still acts in a patriarchal society, the text's suggestion and rejection of male influence is notable given the example of Eva. While Eva battled with David about moving to the cooperative home, Jeannie is able to make major life decisions that are not initiated or approved by a male authority. Jeannie does tell David about her choice—and this could potentially be construed as her seeking permission from a patriarchal figure—yet notably, the language is strictly informative. Nowhere does she ask

advice or seek approval; nor does she receive approval. David is reticent about her decision, asking only about why she has made such a choice. Despite David's lack of enthusiasm, his response does not seem to negatively affect Jeannie's intentions.

While Eva's downfall stems from her inability to escape the occupation that society has forced upon her, Jeannie is doing what Eva could not do: defying economic concerns and pursuing a vocation that is meaningful for her. Various aspects undoubtedly contribute to her ability to do so. She is not burdened by responsibility to either children or husband. She has had the opportunity to pursue formal education given her profession and her statement that she may go "back to school" (Olsen, "Tell" 69). Economic concerns have not restricted her to the extent that they have restricted Eva, for while Jeannie is no example of opulence, she is, nevertheless, no figure of need either.

Additionally, while she does mention a discomfiting aspect of her job, she claims that her decision does not stem from the nature of the job itself. This is an interesting distinction. Eva's revolt against her circumstances seems motivated by a desire to resist oppressive forces; however, in claiming that her actions are not motivated by harsh conditions, Jeannie becomes the manifestation of a woman making a difficult life decision of her own volition rather than in reaction to negative, external realities. For instance, the job is not detrimental to her health or insufficient for her financial needs. Instead, it does not suit her.

Jeannie identifies her decision as stemming from her own desires. While Eva does not possess the autonomy to meaningfully resist her circumstances, Jeannie is empowered enough to explicitly seek that which is meaningful to her. Her statement, "I just don't know what I want to do, maybe go back to school, maybe go to art school" is meaningful in its demonstration of ambivalence (Olsen, "Tell" 69). Jeannie acknowledges her desire for something different, and

while she cannot even articulate what it is that she longs for, she is intent on trying to uncover a better path.

Jeannie, Olsen's figure of progress, appears to understand her capabilities and to be set upon exercising them, and in doing so, she demonstrates the reality of an inheriting generation. While Eva expires, Jeannie is poised to make positive changes. In Chametzky's words, she "[carries] the torch of memory onward, redeeming the agony of her grandmother's death and life. Jeannie is an artist. . ." (125). The text never relays whether or not Jeannie actually follows through on her intent to change her life. As such, Jeannie forever remains an emblem of hopeful possibility, not actuality. She heralds the potential for agency, yet it is as if the text leaves Jeannie's dilemma unsolved, passing on the task of achieving greater female fulfillment for further generations to lay hold of and finally bring to fruition.

NOTES

¹ In transcribing Olsen's typewritten words, I have standardized breaks between phrases and corrected negligible typing errors, such as double letters.

² "Death and Transfiguration" is a tone poem, composed by Richard Strauss during 1888-89.

³ In *Feminists Rethink the Self*, Marilyn Friedman identifies three aspects of autonomy: political, moral, and personal (41). Political autonomy refers to "government by the people, usually embodied in such political rights as voting; and also civil rights, which secure a domain of individual freedom against undue government action" (Friedman 41). Moral autonomy is the notion of an individual "acting according to moral principles, values, and rules that are, in some significant sense, her own" (Friedman 41). Personal autonomy denotes "individual self-determination over those aspects of our lives in which we are not bound by moral requirements and may choose among a variety of morally permissible outcomes" (Friedman 41).

⁴ As the original format and punctuation (or lack thereof) of this passage is compelling, I have chosen to maintain accuracy in these areas as much as possible.

IV. CONCLUSION

Olsen's words are intended to impart change—to shape individuals into communal participants in an ideal world. The furtherance of her work requires the identification of and opposition to all that thwarts humanity. While Olsen's intentions and successes are notable, so, too, are her failures. As Reid states, "we understand ourselves and others best through inquiring into the facts, not through romanticizing even our heroes" ("Panthea"). Olsen never seemed to realize the reality of possibility that first emerged during her childhood years of artistic brilliance or the ideological commitments that hindered fuller exploration of that genius. Throughout her life, she neither comprehended the presence of internal constraints nor the need or possibility of transcending her circumstances.

Olsen herself struggled for autonomy—both hers and countless others'—yet she refused accountability for her own actions, consistently blaming circumstances and thereby failing in action or text to provide future generations with a positive example of a woman attempting to exercise her independence. Certainly, societal forces hindered Olsen; however, she did possess agency, as demonstrated by her radical actions. Olsen's assertion that individuals must participate in righting social wrongs reveals her belief in the possibility of progress, thereby simultaneously confirming the possibility of rational, productive choice.

Even after achieving an impressive level of success and influence, Olsen chose to focus on the external constraints that hinder production rather than the perseverance of her will and the ways in which her dedication manifested itself in positive social contributions. "Tell Me a Riddle" presciently exposed the falsity of ideological commitments that propel women to seek fulfillment through domesticity, yet Olsen never considered her own ideological commitments

about fulfillment, literature, and the dichotomy between the communal and the individual. As such, these internal constraints inevitably hindered her writing.

Olsen's internalization of the Left's literary theory greatly impacted the content, form, and, likely, the process of her composing. From Communism, Olsen also learned to valorize the communal and villainize the individual. Action superseded contemplation, which further thwarted her ability to create. As Party rhetoric claimed that a person's social duty—and her only chance at genuine fulfillment—must necessarily stem from action in service to the collective whole, Olsen spent much time in the service of other, subsequently denying any bourgeois expressions of individuality.

Reading “Tell Me a Riddle” against the text of Olsen's life reveals that fulfillment does not necessarily come from communal pursuit. Despite Olsen's activism, she experienced disillusionment similar to Eva. Eva mourns her disconnect from humanity, yet Olsen prioritized activism only to mourn her failure to satiate her hunger for artistry. Olsen sought fulfillment through the communal, yet she never acknowledged the possibility of individual action that simultaneously brought personal fulfillment and contributed to the greater good.

Although external circumstances thwart humanity from full potential, internal constraints—such as unawareness of one's own potential agency or the limitations of ideological commitments—threaten to undermine progress as well. The hopeful message of “Tell Me a Riddle” centers on Jeannie. Although ambivalent, Jeannie espouses her desire to leave a stifling vocation, emerging as a figure of hope. She, however, remains potentiality, not actuality, eternally damned to a state of abeyance in which she postulates a step toward self-realization but never acts upon it. Jeannie's situation hints at the necessity for women to act volitionally in regard to their lives; furthermore, Olsen's own life confirms this need.

Much could be said on the notion of progress. In Michel Foucault's theory, "deliberate self-transformation . . . necessarily involves taking up in a transformative way the relations of subjection that have made us who we are" (Allen 68). Inherent in this statement is the necessity of awareness and intent. In reference to Olsen's "I Stand Here Ironing," Joanne Frye identifies the need to "share in the efforts to resist the fatalism of life lived helplessly 'before the iron'—never denying the power of the iron but never yielding to the iron in final helplessness either" ("I" 291). Similarly, Allen notes the need to "reject the false opposition between radical contextualism and the commitment to reason's actual capacity to transcend its situatedness by developing instead a principled form of contextualism that emphasizes our need *both* to posit context-transcending ideals *and* to continually unmask their status as illusions rooted in interest and power-laden contexts" (148). Fostering such a reality—one of both optimism in regard to progress and awareness of the illusory nature of the motivating ideal—indeed becomes a necessary task.

Olsen herself desired to see progress, especially in the area of women's writing. Ellen Cronan Rose outlines Olsen's "plea and her pledge: that the unobserved should be perceived, that the fleeting should be fixed, that the inarticulate should come to writing" (as qtd. in Martin 17). In 1978, during a talk occurring as part of the "Women's Voices" writing workshop at the University of Southern California at Santa Cruz, Olsen instructed,

Most of us are going to have limitations in our lives; if we are going to put our time into achieving the perfect poem, story, it may be that we have taken a wrong direction. . . . *Do what you can at the time of your life that you can.* Make out of those limitations, out of those scraps, what art you can, never losing your

ambition, never losing your aspiration, but at the cost of aspiration, don't blind yourself to what you *can* do. . . . work that can get done mustn't be lost as it's been lost in the past. (as qtd. in Kallet, Cofer 74)

Olsen's last line seems to imply that past loss may have been just as preventable as future loss. Her reference to painstaking perfectionism as a wrong direction seems strikingly applicable to her own life. In her charge to the next generation, she implicitly outlines the need for avoiding the very mistakes she made. But even in this passage, Olsen only acknowledges limitations that arise externally.

In her battle against external constraints, Olsen failed to give due attention to the problem of internal constraints—or to recognize the extent to which they stifled her own life. Instead of highlighting the ways in which women can pursue greater autonomy, Olsen posited a radical contextualism against which victims struggle in vain. She seemingly believed in social progress, but she contradictorily focused on futility rather than possibility. As such, she did not postulate ways to further female empowerment and to therefore create a societal atmosphere where Eva's reality, inescapable immolation by societal circumstances, is not inevitable. In Olsen's inability, or perhaps refusal, to recognize and trace the ramifications of agency, she has disregarded a subject that remains essential to contemporary women. Her own life stands as testament to the need for women to identify ideological inhibitors and to pursue positive action within their respective spheres.

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