

Research paper on tell me a riddle by tillie olsen

[Family](#), [Parents](#)



Often, an author will write about what they know best. Which, invariably, is their own experience of life, love and everything in between. Authors do this for a number of reasons: because they know it so well that they can make an excellent story of it; because they usually have a message that they wish to convey to the world as a result of that experience. Tell Me a Riddle is a collection of short stories, written by Tillie Olsen, first published in 1961. It is a prime example of an author writing for the purpose of conveying a message: Olsen was a well-established feminist writer; her death, at the age of 94, in 2007, brought about commentaries of her life with regard to her working class background, immigrant parents and her ability to draw on tough experiences to write wonderful stories. (Bosman) Olsen utilized her tough upbringing to influence and shape her stories of hardship and struggle. The purpose of this essay is to discuss the life and times of Tillie Olsen in conjunction with her short story collection, Tell Me a Riddle, with a particular focus on the individual stories of I Stand Here Ironing and Tell Me a Riddle, the story, and their feminist motives derived from her own feelings of silence and isolation.

Olsen was born as Tillie Lerner, to immigrant parents on January 14 1912, in Omaha, Nebraska. (Reid 6) Growing up, Olsen craved stories of her parents' struggle: how they defied the Cossacks in the 1905 attempted Russian Revolution, and their political activist sensibilities that helped to "topple an ancient and corrupt regime." (Reid 6) Their stories of the old country would be enough to fuel the imagination of any child, and Olsen was no exception: she grew up to become one of America's most prolific feminist and working class writers. Her tales of marginalized social groups such as women,

immigrants and the working classes were quickly recognized as being a relevant commentary in the 1960s and 70s. The short stories entitled *I Stand Here Ironing* and *Tell Me a Riddle* are characteristic of her understanding of struggle: although Olsen was brought up in a fundamentally American upbringing, with all the luxuries that accompany that, she was also very aware of the struggle of other, less fortunate people: “[she] was also touched by a larger, more universal awareness of other worlds where people struggled for liberty.” (Orr 24) This suggests that Olsen was acutely aware of how difficult her life could have been while still maintaining her feminist sensibilities that reflect the need for the woman to be an individual, away from her family.

I Stand Here Ironing is one such feminist commentary that tells of a mother, reflecting on the childhood and upbringing of her eldest child and daughter. The mother, deserted by her husband, raised her daughter alone and with that scenario comes poverty, struggle and missed opportunities: “ We were poor and could not afford for her the soil of easy growth.” (Olsen) This image of a bud struggling to grow into a beautiful flower is integral to the story as it symbolizes the little family’s fight to survive. Olsen describes the daughter as being a beautiful baby who “ blew shining bubbles of sound.” (Olsen) However, as she was so poor, the mother had to give her daughter to her deserting husband’s family for a while so that she could raise funds and when she finally took her daughter back, she describes her as being “ nervous” like her father, with “ pockmarks”: “ All the baby loveliness had gone.” (Olsen) The daughter’s fading beauty runs parallel with the fading hope felt by the young family: initially, the mother says: “ with all the fierce

rigidity of first motherhood, I did like the books then said.” (Olsen) Her joy of motherhood spilling over into wanting to get it right and do it properly, whilst eventually, the story states: “ The old man living in the back once said, in his gentle way: “ You should smile at Emily more when you look at her.”” (Olsen) Seemingly without realizing, the mother has stopped looking upon her daughter fondly and has become more caught up with the anguish of raising a child alone.

Olsen’s parents were Jewish, born in the Minsk province: 50% of the population there were Jewish but Jews had no rights whatsoever. (Reid 7) This concept of restriction and a lack of control resonated with Olsen when, as an adult, she was struck by the feminist plight being of a similar nature: Jews and women both being unable to express themselves or exercise their own ability to make a choice. Olsen’s message is that for women, they are often faced with the choice of being a good mother or a good worker; in the case of *I Stand Here Ironing*, the protagonist is a single mother and as such, she has to strike a very fine balance between the two options.

Olsen’s message is one of the guilt felt by women for not being able to wholly commit to their offspring, in situations like these. This guilt would have, undoubtedly, followed the guilt felt by Olsen’s parents about their inability to raise their child in their native country. However, their control over that situation was as palpable as that of the young mother in Olsen’s book: not at all. Her character regrets having a baby so young and laments the failure of her marriage which left her with precious few options; the story concludes with a small prayer designed to encourage the character’s

daughter and the reader to re-consider their life as a woman (Snodgrass 280): “ she is more than this dress on the ironing board, helpless before the iron.” (Olsen) The character is implying that if she had her time again, she may do things differently, and Olsen is making a clear feminist message that sometimes, it is okay to prioritize your own needs and desires. The phrase “ helpless before the iron” suggests that she feels trapped as a mother.

This message is clearly a personal one since Olsen spent twenty years of her adult life, devoted to raising her three daughters and working low-income jobs. She also participated in a number of political activist movements, most notably feminism and the Young Communists’ League. (Reid 120) As her children grew, she was able to return to writing and began studying at University where she began to write the four stories featured in Tell Me a Riddle. The significance of As I Stand Here Ironing is not lost on the reader as Olsen clearly states a feminist message that says women do not need to feel guilty for simply putting themselves first. The narrator’s inner monologue which seems directed at nobody in particular, but rather everyone all at once, is further evidence that Olsen felt as though she had put herself low on her list of priorities for too long. This story is Olsen revealing herself to the world: older, wiser and with focus placed on being who she wants to be.

The plot of Tell Me a Riddle is also significant to Olsen’s life. An elderly couple, who are estranged from one another, decide to go on one last trip together after finding out that she is dying. They go and visit their granddaughter who gives them both a whole new lease of life, as well as helping them find their old love for one another. The couple are estranged

because the wife feels under-valued and unable to enjoy the experiences she wants to enjoy: “ Now, when it pleases you, you find a reading circle for me. And forty years ago when the children were morsels and there was a Circle, did you stay home with them once so I could go?” (Olsen) This again reflects the devotion Olsen gave to her own children whilst her husband worked and lived a patriarchal life, as men did then. It implies that there was a level of annoyance and regret, felt by Olsen, in giving up so much of her life to her family and her husband. Her feminist sensibilities require her to consider this by discussing what she might have chosen to do had she not had children or married at quite such a young age.

An author’s life and times can often influence their writing. In Olsen’s case, her writing reflects her desire to have had more individual free time, away from her family. While this is not a direct comment on her relationship with them, or even her capability as a mother, it is discursively linked to her blooming at a later age than the average person (her first publication with the anthology of short stories in 1961, followed by a novel and a collection of essays). This is definitely as a result of having to devote her time and energy to caring for her family.

Both of the stories addressed in this essay reflect the subliminal idea that Olsen may have felt as though she missed out on reaching her full potential because of the decisions she made at an early age. The two protagonists in both of the stories are women who, when reflecting upon their life, have a number of discontent feelings as to the route their lives took. It is impossible to read these short stories and not immediately make the assumption that

Olsen felt the same way: her life was reasonably difficult from birth, given her parents' background and the difficulties that they faced in their own country and then as immigrants in America and the adversity that they would have faced on a daily basis. However, Olsen appears to have a well-adjusted view of the world: she clearly feels as though she could have done more with her life but that she adores her children. The mother in *I Stand Here Ironing* indicates that whilst she and her daughter have had their struggles, she would still have had her daughter but maybe at a later time. The central, underlying message to both stories is that women must strike a balance between themselves and their families and that they should not feel the socially-constructed grief that comes along with wanting to be both a mother and a success.

References

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