

I stand here ironing: lessons conveyed and critical analysis

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“ I Stand Here Ironing” is a short story by Tillie Olsen that narrates a mother’s thoughts about her daughter, but ultimately reveals more about the mother. The mother’s thoughts about how her once beautiful baby daughter turned out poorly are prompted by an earlier phone call by a third person. The 19 year old daughter was raised during the Great depression and World War 2 era which prompts the daughter’s beliefs about life being inevitably over in a couple of years when everyone will be “ atom-dead”. The times the daughter grew up in along with the absence of a Father allows the Mother to juxtapose her assumption of blame and her justification, or deflection of blame, for the current state of her daughter as “ more than this dress on the ironing board, helpless before the iron” (lines 86-87).

As the mother shifts her tone from past to present, the iron simultaneously moves back and forth on the ironing board (line 1). The author uses anaphor to attract attention to the early descriptions of the daughter in lines 35-39 when she thinks, “ She was a beautiful baby. She blew shining bubbles of sound. She loved motion, loved light, loved color and music and textures. She would lie on the floor in her blue overalls patting the surface so hard in ecstasy her hands and feet would blur.” The in depth descriptions of how beautiful the daughter was as a baby causes the mother to continually question herself and why the daughter did not turn out the way she thought she would.

The author also uses the mother’s questioning of herself to show how she sub-consciously feels guilty while she is justifying how the daughter turned out. This is evident in lines 33-34 when the mother asks herself, “ Why do I

put that first? I do not even know if it matter, or if it explains anything.” The question is in reference to her speech about how she nursed her daughter and tried her hardest to take care of her.

Furthermore, the mother adds additional emphasis to her quandary by juxtaposing her feelings of guilt about how her daughter turned out with her deflection of blame and use of excuses. The mother ends a paragraph by stating that she didn't look after her daughter enough, and begins the following paragraph by excusing herself from this feeling of guilt by telling herself how hard tried to raise the daughter. The mother ends the paragraph with, “ But the seeing eyes were few or nonexistent. Including mine” (Olsen 25-26). Another example of the juxtaposition of assumption of blame and deflection of blame when the mother shifts back to past tense after a short conversation with her daughter about why she believes she does not need to study for her midterms. “ Her father left me before she was a year old. I had to work her first six years when there was work, or I sent her home and to his relatives there were years she had care she hates. She was dark and thin and foreign looking in a world where the prestige went to blondness and curly hair and dimples; she was slow where glibness was prized” (Olsen 65-72). The mother begins doing her best to deflect blame from herself including blaming a father that walked out on both of them and her work. The mother even goes so far as to blame the daughter because she didn't look as pretty as she was supposed to. This truly reveals the mother's shallow feelings towards her daughter. The mother juxtaposes this deflection of blame with a confession, or admittance. “ I was a young mother, I was a

distracted mother” (Olsen 75). Although the mother has a brief confession, she quickly goes back to pointing fingers at others as to why her daughter is not the way that she wants her to be. “ There were the other children pushing up, demanding. Her younger sister seemed all that she was not. There were years she did not want me to touch her. She kept too much in herself, her life was such she had to keep too much to herself” (Olsen 76-80). The mother once again refers to outside sources as to why the daughter did not turn out as expected.

Olsen utilizes feelings of determinism throughout the short story. The daughter was raised during a time of government corruption and lack of belief in authority. The mother echoes her beliefs that the daughter was bound, or determined, to end up the way she did due to the circumstances she grew up in. The mother states, “ She is a child of her age, of depression, of war, of fear” (Olsen 82-82). Although large-scale world events have great impacts upon children growing up, they do not completely determine whom that child is or can become. The mother believes that will and choice are taken over by a sense of fate or determinism.

The short story “ I Stand Here Ironing” is a narrative by Tillie Olsen that reveals important characteristics about both the mother and the daughter. The mother begins pondering over her daughter’s current state because she received a phone call asking about her daughter earlier. The mother juxtaposes her deflection of blame and assumption of blame citing excuses such as the absence of a Father or father figure for the daughter as well as

the government corrupted times as to why the daughter did not turn out the way she wanted her to.