

I stand here ironing
excerpt ap essay
essay sample

[Family](#)



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

In "I Stand Here Ironing", by Tillie Olsen, Olsen uses the symbolism of the iron, specific historical allusions, and condemning emotional tone to characterize the mother and her doubtful attitude towards her daughter. Olsen uses how and what the mother is ironing to symbolize her feelings for her daughter. When someone irons a piece of clothing, it is usually to get out the wrinkles and to make it look almost perfect to wear into the world. This idea is similar to what the mother is doing to her daughter's dress. In the first line of the poem, Olsen says, "I stand here ironing, and what you asked me moves tormented back and forth with the iron" (1-2). The mother is ironing her daughter's dress to make it 'straight', just as she wants to try and perfect her daughter so that she won't be unsuccessful. She expresses that it's not more that she can do. She says, "'Who needs help?'... Even if! came, what good would it do? You think because I am her mother.!" (7-8). The mother expresses that she is nineteen and therefore can control her own life. However, she does wish that she has done more. As the mother is ironing, she reflects over her daughter's life and how she could have did better.

From reading the entire poem, conclusions were made that the family were not as fortunate. The mother wants the best for her daughter and wants her to succeed but it's hard to do that especially in the circumstances presented in the poem. Olsen uses specific historical allusions to help rationalize her feelings and actions toward her daughter. The poem has sudden allusions to the time period they are in. For example, Olsen says, "It was the pre-relief, pre-WPA world of the depression" (45-46). This reference alludes to President F. D. Roosevelt's New Deal with emphasis on his work-relief

institution. The importance of this quote is that this New Deal made it harder for single moms to support their families. The fact that they are in this decade give the mother a rationale as to why things are the way that they are and why she can't provide like she needs to.

Not only is this poem set during the action plan of FDR's New Deal but also during WWII. The daughter says, " ' in a couple of years when we'll all be atom-dead they won't matter a bit?' " (58-59). The quote shows that they are in the years when the Atomic bomb is developed and its even more crazier than a usual day. The mother indirectly uses these scenarios to cover up how much control she should have and how her relationship has diminished over the years of her daughter's life. Towards the end of the poem, the mother talks about how people treated her daughter and how she wish that she could do something about it. Her tone seems to change from hopeful to condemning. Olsen uses the mother's condemning tone in the mother's voice to show how she feels about her daughter's future in the world. The poem gives off an essence that the family may be poor because the mother continuously exemplifies regret for leaving her daughter with people that didn't seem to appreciate her either. It made her feel even worse. Olsen says, " She was a miracle to me, but when she was eight months old I had to leave her daytimes with the woman downstairs to whom she was no miracle at all..." (39-43).

The quote shows that the mother never regretted her daughter but it wasn't too much that she can do because of the decade that they had to endure. Even though she wanted to do more, it was physically impossible. She only

had so much to give and now that her daughter is older, she can only hope that she can do what she needs to do to succeed. Olsen's "I Stand Here Ironing" uses symbolism of the iron, specific historical allusions, and the fixated tone of condemnation to give reasons as to why the mother has a doubtful attitude towards her daughter. The mother is characterized as a mother with good intentions but it's only so much she can do at this point in her daughter's life. Olsen develops the mother's relationship with her daughter as a passive power between the mother and the people that come into her daughter's life. In the end, the mother just hopes that she "Only help her to know—help make it so there is cause for her to know—that she is more than this dress on the ironing board, helpless before the iron", says Olsen (86-89).