

One for all in
yonnondio



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

In contrast to many other Depression-era novels, in which the teamwork of the common man is seen as society's glue, Tillie Olsen's *Yonnondio* looks with great admiration at one family's struggle to keep above water. Through the travails of a coal-mining/farming family, Anna Holbrook becomes the one constant in a society that turns man against himself, and where fortune is evanescent. The thirst for something stable is evident as the children show their awe of the physical world. As an adult explains the stars to Mazie, Olsen writes: "As his words misted into the night and disappeared, she scarcely listened ~~to~~ only the aura over them of timelessness, of vastness, of eternal things that had been before her and would be after her, remained and entered into her with a great hurt and wanting." (33) The present, the words describing the stars, hold no intrigue for Mazie; the idea of a permanence stronger than the Depression does. Two pages later, Olsen writes of Mazie stripping corn silk: "she would dream of weaving it into garments incredible. But the tassels withered, grew brown and smelly, and she had to throw them away." (35) Her actual life results only in death, and she must again call up something enduring, "a poem learned from Old Man Caldwell." (35) Olsen views the Holbrook's struggle as heroic. Says Caldwell, "'Mazie. Live, don't exist. Better to be a cripple and alive than dead, not able to feel anything. No, there is more ~~to~~ to rebel against what will not let life be.'" (37) It is this very nobility that allows the Holbrook family to survive past expectations. Life is filled with hurdles, most coming from other people. After learning about different nationalities in school, Mazie tells two girls about life on a farm. Another boy overhears them and snidely remarks, "'So you come from the country where our milk comes from; ya learn about bulls?' and smack, head butted her in the stomach." (50) His use of the word 'country'

has an ambiguous effect; it could either mean the countryside or an actual country. With his comment, Olsen shows how the two worlds, country and city, are fundamentally separated. This is further emphasized when the teacher scolds Mazie: “ Perhaps you indulged in rough play of this nature where you come from, but we do not permit it here, nor does it go unpunished.” (50-1) The lack of cooperation between men is shown as Jim’s young, single work partner quits in protest of unfair conditions. Jim keeps his fury silent: “ Alright for him to talk, alright with nothing more important to worry about than getting canned up and stepping out a floosie. he couldn’t see what was really around and he believed the bull about freedom of opportunity and something about pursuit of happiness.” (62) Olsen’s condensation of the maxims of our country shows their value as clichés and their disconnection with the Holbrooks. The proper method of living lies with the ants Erina observes: “ Watch the little ants. Don’t hurt their houses. They have to hurry and work so hard and carry heavy things and I see them carry each other sometime.” (120) Further insults are heaped upon the family. A doctor refers to the family in several derogatory ways. “ These animals never notice but when they’re hungry or want a drink or a woman. Pigsty, the way these people live.” (77) They are denied credit at a grocery store by an immigrant: “ All the time you say pay, pay, pay. No more trust.” (137) The ultimate sacrifice is made, a conventional plot ploy in Depression novels, as Anna, discovering she has been impregnated by Jim on his quick visit home, consents to an abortion. The conflict is made somewhat surreal by Olsen: “ To have this child, to give it its life, to see the shape of what this life would be. And a revulsion so violent it seemed every fiber in her body shuddered erect into a NO. (They’s five kids to take care on now.)”

(150) Anna holds a strong feeling of self-resentment, shown by the passage leading up to the procedure: “ Boiling the scissors. They had to be sterilized Christy said, or she would get infected. But how could she hold them ~~s~~so hot ~~s~~and not make them germy again?” (150) She soon dies, and Mazie is left as the emotional resource for the split family. The last passage reveals Mazie’s mixture of compassion and strength necessary for survival in the dusty, cold world: “ Her hand on the arm around him was open and tender, but the other lay fisted and terrible like her father’s that night in the kitchen. Till the day ~~s~~” (152) Olsen has faith in the family; they have waded through hardship after hardship, encountered abandonment and death, and still they will wake the next day. Survival here is not accomplished by reliance upon others, but on one’s own reserve of will. This is a stark departure from Steinbeck’s and others’ views on the Depression; nonetheless, both schools of thought hold tremendous sympathy for the lives full of misery about which they wrote.