

Victoria Carlos

Professor Wegener

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### Defining Identity and Expectation in "I Stand Here Ironing"

Tillie Olsen's short story, "I Stand Here Ironing," is an exquisite example of first-person narration in the form of an interior monologue. Olsen's unidentified narrator embarks on a psychoanalytic journey where she grapples with elucidating her own guilt and failures as a single, working mother while simultaneously struggling to comprehend the profundity of her own daughter's character. Reading the text through the unidentified narrator's convoluted mind effectively tells the story of an emotionally distant relationship between a mother and daughter who are not only victims of circumstance but are also in search of identity in a society that dictates the appearances and actions of women as mothers and daughters.

This deeply personal journey for identity is first framed by Olsen's contrivance of a narrator who is acutely aware of time. Ordinarily, the past, present, and future act as catalysts for change and growth, yet in this story, the narrator appears trapped in a purgatory of her mind and monotonous existence. This can be seen in that the narrative and only real action in the story is composed of melancholy recollections about the mother's past rather than optimism about her future. The opening line of the story reads, "I stand here ironing and what you asked me moves tormented back and forth with the iron." (1). This statement immediately implies a sense of repetition with the mundane motion of the iron while setting a grim tone with the use of the word "tormented," which could double as the perfect word to describe the narrator's train of thought.

Olsen also uses the iron as a setup for the narrative to come. While physically ironing, the mother will also attempt to metaphorically smooth out the wrinkles of her overbearing mind, which harbors anxieties about time, who she is, and who her daughter has grown to be because of her. It is also in Olsen's expert composure of the narrator's point of view that the structural role of time can be seen. The narrator's stream of consciousness is only broken by short pieces of present-tense action such as, "Ronnie is calling. He is wet, and I change him." (5). Small breaks like this only emphasize the matter-of-fact tone of the narrator's tiresome routine that she faces every day as a mother.

Reading through the mother's stream of consciousness, Olsen also implies that the narrator subconsciously fears time because it will force her to mull over her shortcomings as a mother. She states, "And when is there time to remember, to sift, to weigh, to estimate, to total?" (1). It appears that the narrator uses time as an excuse to face her truths of being a lackluster mother. When confronted with the proposition of speaking to an authoritative figure, presumably from her daughter's school, she says, "Or I will become engulfed with all I did or did not do, with what should have been and what cannot be helped." (1) Essentially, the narrator appears imprisoned by the construct of time in which she becomes buried in worry about the past, future, and present. This displays the stagnancy of the mother's mindset perhaps due to a lifetime of being told by society what is best for her daughter, resulting in a narrator who is unsure of all her past decisions and reluctant to change her future while coincidentally confronting anxieties about her daughter's character and future. It's also ambiguous at best if time will ever soothe the narrator's turbulent thoughts.

Pressure from society to perform well as a mother has undoubtedly caused the narrator's oxymoronically silent yet loud anxieties. From Emily's birth, the narrator's actions have been manipulated by those around her. The most poignant example of this could be Emily's father's abandonment of them. It was his choice, through no fault of the narrator's own, that he left her to bear the identity of a mother, father, caretaker, and breadwinner. Another example of societal pressure occurs within the mother's chaotic chronology of life events, in which she frequently repeats, "they said," "they feel," and "they persuaded" as ways to displace the blame and guilt she feels for mistakes she made during Emily's childhood.

By utilizing the ambiguous term, "they" Olsen makes a striking comparison to the narrator, who is given no identity, in the sense that the narrator is just another woman, indistinguishable from the rest of society because of her choices founded upon "their" guidance. To further illustrate this idea, the mother has done what others have told her is best in order to provide her daughter with some semblance of a good life, yet she is trying to reach for events that would explain Emily's behavior. The narrator says, "I nursed her. They feel that's important nowadays. I nursed all the children, but with her, with all the fierce rigidity of first motherhood, I did like the books then said." (2). Olsen illustrates society's distorted idea of motherhood as something that can be taught, rather than what motherhood actually is - an instinctual love. It can also be said that the mother's identity has been lost to others' opinions and expectations.

Societal expectations are not just limited to motherhood in the story. They are also inextricably tangled with appearances. It is what essentially divides the narrator from understanding the depths of her daughter's emotional distress. The mother refers to her daughter's beauty only in the past tense. Olsen writes, "or see her poring over her baby pictures, making me

tell her over and over how beautiful she had been.”(1) and, “She was a beautiful baby” (1). It is evident that from an early age, the narrator, perhaps subconsciously, assisted in harboring Emily’s insecurities because of her and society’s emphasis on appearances. These superficial notions only carry over into Emily’s adolescence when “they” persuaded the narrator to send Emily to a convalescent home. The narrator says, “She fretted about her appearance, thin and dark and foreign-looking at a time when every little girl was supposed to look or thought she should look a chubby blond replica of Shirley Temple.”(4). Not only is the narrator’s sense of identity lost in societal perceptions, but Emily, as a young girl, is experiencing the same struggles with seeking an identity in a society obsessed with attractiveness. This could be Olsen’s commentary on how women, throughout the course of their lives, are confined by ideas other than their own.

The struggle with appearance and identity also takes place within the strained relationship between Emily and Susan. Essentially, Susan depicts all that society wants from a young girl. She is described as “golden and curly haired and chubby, quick and articulate and assured, everything in appearance and manner Emily was not;” (5). Moreover, it seems that Susan still has her father as a participant in her life. She is, in fact, the complete opposite of Emily, and the narrator acknowledges such. It is interesting, however, the juxtaposition that Olsen suggests between the two sisters and their circumstances, both physically and emotionally. For instance, Emily possesses a sense of originality in her personality that her mother is continuously attempting to comprehend. An example of this originality is seen when Emily takes to the stage. The narrator says, “Now suddenly she was Somebody, and as imprisoned in her difference as in anonymity.” (6). Emily’s newfound success as a performer is not a result of conforming to

society's expectations but a testament to the benefits of being largely discarded by society as a whole. Additionally, Olsen provides irony in that Emily has found success in “acting” in order to find herself in a position of belonging. This is all contrasted by Susan, the typical sweet-natured, bubbly blonde, who is recognized as a success in society, yet has little memorable impact on her mother’s monologue.

It is only with the formation of Emily’s identity that the narrator can begin to contemplate her own, guided by her question, “Was this Emily?”(6). This question indicates that the narrator’s contemplation only seems to pose more questions than it has answered. She is still unsure of her daughter’s future, and her failures as a mother still guilt her . She says, “I was a young mother, I was a distracted mother. There were the other children pushing up, demanding. Her younger sister was all that she was not.”(7). These statements, coupled with the relentless uncertainty she still possesses about her past and her daughter's future, only reiterate her cyclical concern with failure and time, which prohibit her from discovering individuality. It is only Emily who creates a clear picture of her mother’s identity when she says, “Aren’t you ever going to finish the ironing, Mother? Whistler painted his mother in a rocker. I’d have to paint mine standing over an ironing board.” (6). By referencing a portrait, Olsen is satirically suggesting that the narrator would only exist immortally in the form of a woman performing tedious housework. It is essentially unclear if the narrator can ever develop her own identity due to her captivity under society's stereotypes and expectations. The narrator is simply defined by her chores and duties as a mother.

At the surface level, this story is about a mother searching to understand her daughter while contemplating her identity and failures as a mother. But in actuality, Olsen’s orchestration

of an unidentified narrator sifting through her mind for understanding evokes a sense of pained relatability amongst all mothers and female readers. It transforms it into a story about women confronting society as a whole. This is accentuated by the story's only action, a nameless woman ironing, who only pauses momentarily to take care of other household tasks. While the narrator's outcome is uncertain, she does hint that she wishes for a more fulfilling life for her daughter by stating, "help make it so there is cause for her to believe that she is more than this dress on the ironing board, helpless before the iron." (7). Here, Olsen could be using the mother, the dress, and the iron, as a metaphor for how she wishes to morph society's unrealistic expectations of mother's into one of change for a more positive future.

Overall, Olsen's text displays the unfathomable hardships many women, including the narrator, have had to endure to provide a life for their children. And are left in return, with impossible expectations that society has bestowed upon them. In no way does Olsen romanticize the job of motherhood. Instead, she utilizes her narrator's voice to exhibit the guilt, pain, and anxieties mothers and women face when they feel like they have failed to perform their maternal duties in a raw and personable way.

