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From the Margins to the Forefront: Tillie Olsen's Mediation as Figure and Author

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Abstract

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Tillie Olsen's life experiences and self-identification as a working class woman provide a strong basis for analyzing her fiction as partly autobiographical. As she wrote, she developed her position as a recognized and award winning author into that of a literary mediator for socially marginalized subjects, actively working to represent certain conditions of exclusion due to social, racial, economic, and sexual factors during the 1970's and 1980's. Through analysis of her fiction and non-fiction texts, her use of modernist writing techniques, her purpose as a writer, and her impact on the literary canon, it becomes possible to see how she has altered the literary landscape and has made those who suffer exclusion visible and legible.

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From the Margins to the Forefront: Tillie Olsen's Mediation as Figure and Author

Mediating Marginality

In 1934, Tillie Olsen was arrested in San Francisco, California for her involvement in the West Coast Waterfront Strike that led to the unionization of all West Coast ports of the United States (Pratt 121). Shortly later, she received a letter from her brother which denounced her behavior as a communist. He tells Olsen of how her arrest may be published in newspapers in Omaha and could provide people with the opportunity to see her behavior as a “chance to say ‘see what happens to the revolutionary Jew’” (121). Rather than accept his words as fact and feel ashamed by her behavior, Olsen instead took the opportunity to think more deeply about what it would mean to succeed as a writer. She states, “It would be the greatest happiness of my life to go [and] throw the book” on the desk of her former teacher and “say ‘look what the revolutionary Jew has done now’” (Pratt 121).

Born in Omaha, Nebraska in 1912 or 1913 to Russian immigrant parents, Tillie Lerner, later Olsen, was intimately familiar with the fear of social marginalization that her brother expresses in his letter to her. She used the term “silenced” prominently in her work to describe what can happen to individuals that are deemed irrelevant or unimportant by society (*Silences* 6). As a child, she suffered from her own marginalization due to her position as a child of working-class Jewish immigrants. Raised in such an environment, she became entangled in the struggle for survival and, as a result, was unable to complete her high school education. However, Olsen was not discouraged by the treatment she received from both inside and outside of her family;

instead her motivation increased. Thus, her works served as an effort to “pull from the shadows” those who are marginalized, and represent the social and economic circumstances that make creativity both possible and impossible for such subjects.

Therefore, this thesis will argue that Tillie Olsen uses her position as a mediator and activist to represent those who are marginalized subjects, and provide readers, scholars, and teachers with a view of their interiority. I will do so by analyzing her purpose as a writer, as well as her use of modernist writing techniques, including her focus on capturing the movement of ordinary subjects, the use of language as it is spoken, multiple perspectives, and various modes of representation. Furthermore, I will focus on Olsen’s novel *Yonnondio: From the Thirties* and her short story “Tell Me a Riddle” to demonstrate how she is able to represent these characters and their lives. Finally, I will discuss the impact that Olsen has had on the community of readers, academic discourse during the 1970’s and 1980’s and American Literature today.

Olsen’s background and intimate experiences with the struggles of ethnicity, class, and gender assist her in bringing the experiences and the lives of those like her into the minds of her readers. As a result, Olsen refuses to allow those who are excluded, and the reasons for their exclusion, go ignored. She writes for the memory of those individuals, but also for the hope that they will one day have a voice that is heard and valued. However, as Olsen does so, she refrains from criticizing those who have helped establish the dominant views; rather she desires respect for all people. Throughout her texts, including her fictional works *Yonnondio: From the Thirties* and *Tell Me a Riddle*, Olsen does not directly comment on the difficulty and unfairness of the lives of her characters; instead, she gets the reader so involved in her characters’ lives that the readers are lead to a reflective position. In creating such a perspective, readers are then pushed

to consider their own views as to what is right or wrong, just and unjust, and how and what changes need to be made. Rather than reduce the realities of character's lives, Olsen provides a comprehensive view of their lives and the factors that have contributed to their positions, allowing readers to witness not only their struggles, but the reasons and results of these struggles. To do so, Olsen utilizes the everyday language of her characters.

Thus, in order to better understand Tillie Olsen and her work, it is not only important to understand what contributed to her writing, but to understand the obstacles she overcame and shaped into the experiential basis of her writing. Olsen utilizes her experiences and her success in breaking through the barriers set in front of her to bring those who are on the margins of society into the forefront. She does so with both the example she has set as a formerly marginalized woman and her written texts. Through a number of interviews and critical analyses, scholars have had the opportunity to look more deeply into both Olsen's writing and her own examination of her writing. During an interview with Anne-Marie Cusac from *The Progressive*, Olsen is asked "What effect do you hope your writing will have?" In response she states:

I haven't published a lot of fiction. I haven't published a lot of anything. But it does go on, it's taught, anthologized. That's very dear to me, and dearest of all are the people whom it has affected. I know that for some people, they feel that it's their life or the life of their mother, or alcoholic relative [that I'm writing about], or they suffer over a daughter and think, "my wisdom came too late" [as the speaker says in "I Stand Here Ironing"]. There is entrenched power, and with few exceptions it has no feeling for the vulnerability and sacredness of human life. And they have the weapons and the power until there is a movement of people, as has happened over and over in the past...I have a lot of hope from young people, too, with that flame of freedom and light of knowledge, as well as from some of the old people, whom I honor a lot...I don't want to die leaving the world as it is right now. (Cusac)

With this insight into the inner thoughts and intentions of Olsen and her work, it becomes ever clear that Olsen's personal purpose for her writing is to create a space in which marginalized individuals are visible. She does so in order to demonstrate that not only do such people exist, but that they make important contributions every day, just as she did as a mediator and activist, even if these are not recognized.

Life and Fiction

Olsen's interest in marginal subjects stems from her own experiences as an individual who suffered exclusion during various moments throughout her life due to her position as a woman and mother. Her use of the term "silence" highlights what she believes are the central causes of such a phenomenon. Therefore, Olsen has used literature as a space in which she brings those who experience marginalization into the minds of readers. This familiarity with such individuals offers readers an opportunity to make connections between life and her texts. Olsen does not stop at simply representing these individuals. Her purpose in writing goes beyond this as she works to create a space for her characters who have experienced exclusion and offer an alternative to their marginalization. In presenting such characters, she highlights the fact that people such as Eva, Anna, Mazie, and Jim within her text *Yonnonidio: From the Thirties*, have always existed and made significant contributions to society, but that they, and their importance, have been ignored by society. Though Olsen rejects the notion that her texts are overwhelmingly autobiographical, she acknowledges that autobiographical pieces can be found within her novel and collection of short stories.

Throughout *Tell Me a Riddle* and *Yonnonidio: From the Thirties*, there are a number of connections that can be drawn between Olsen's life and the details of her text. For example,

within *Yonnonidio* two of Mazie's father's jobs are working in a mine and a meatpacking house. Olsen is familiar with these two industries as her father worked in a mine and she also lived among packinghouse workers (Pratt 117). The fears and experiences of both the men working in these industries and those of their family are vivid in Olsen's mind and are representative of her use of autobiographical material in her works. Additionally, these provide her with the opportunity to bring these realities to her readers.

Furthermore, in *Tell Me a Riddle*, Eva echoes the concerns that Olsen's mother, Ida Lerner, expresses as a young woman. An assignment that Ida wrote for her English class in 1924 reflects the silences that she felt restricted her from pursuing her desire of earning an education. She writes of her maternal responsibility, revealing, "I am glad to study with ardor but the children wont let me, they go to bed late so it makes me tired, and I cant do my lessons" (Pratt 117). As Lerner reflects upon motherhood as one of the main factors that restrict her freedom to explore her writing, one cannot help but recall Eva from "Tell Me a Riddle" as she also expresses these feelings. She thinks to herself, "Now, when it pleases you, you find a reading circle for me. And 40 years ago when the children were morsels and there was a circle, did you stay home with them once so I could go? Even once?" ("Tell Me a Riddle" 36). Though her husband, David, is now willing to allow her to explore her passions, it is only for selfish reasons that he is doing so. When Eva had this strong desire earlier, David was unconcerned and forced her to remain within the home as a caretaker for their children.

These constrictive circumstances are at the core of this story as it allows Olsen to provide the interior view of her characters that she wants her readers to see and understand. After forty-seven years of marriage, David begins pushing her to move to the Haven, a cooperative home for

the aging. She refuses to give in to his desires and he becomes increasingly angry. Silently, Eva recalls the years she endured being “forced to move to the rhythms of others” (“Tell Me a Riddle” 38) and how, now that the children are no longer at home, it is his job to worry about their survival. She thinks to herself:

Let *him* wrack his head for how they would live. She would not exchange her solitude for anything...For in this solitude she had won to a reconciled peace. Tranquility from having the empty house no longer an enemy, for it stayed clean—not as in the days when (by the perverse logic of exhausted house-wifery) it was her family, the life in it, that had seemed the enemy: tracking, smudging, littering, dirtying, engaging her in endless defeating battle—and on whom her endless defeat had been spewed...Being able at last to live within, and not move to the rhythms of others. (“Tell Me a Riddle” 37-38)

Throughout “Tell Me a Riddle,” Eva does not explicitly express these feelings to her husband. Instead, Olsen communicates these through Eva’s inner thoughts, providing a medium through which Eva’s unedited, uncensored feelings about her restricted life as a mother and wife surface. This raw emotion helps to convey the true and honest feelings that Eva is experiencing and demonstrates Olsen’s ability to represent the interiority of her characters through the everyday language of her characters.

In providing a view of the realities that marginalized and silenced individuals experience through her use of the ordinary language of her characters, Olsen works toward her purpose as a writer. Through this use of language, she shows outsiders the difficulty of living such a life, but furthermore, she offers an alternative. In this scene in particular, she offers the newly found ability to find contentment and appreciation for oneself by learning to “live within, and not move to the rhythms of others.” By looking more deeply within and discovering one’s personal value, one is more likely to fight to secure that he or she is treated with such respect. Moreover, as exemplified by Eva, an individual who lives within and is fully conscious of their own worth will

“not exchange her solitude for anything” and will stop at no cost to ensure that they are no longer silenced or forgotten by others. This idea of “solitude” introduced by Eva is particularly important for her because her life had been filled with the care of others, not herself. As Olsen utilizes the particular language of her character in this scene, the desperation of Eva’s situation becomes clear. Additionally, as revealed earlier, Eva echoes the feelings of Tillie Olsen’s mother, but these feelings may also be attributed to Olsen’s own personal feelings as a mother and wife as she had been married for seventeen years and given birth to her first daughter at the time *Tell Me a Riddle* is published. While connections can be made between Olsen’s fictional characters and her personal life, her non-fiction text *Silences* also provides specific revelations about the difficulties Olsen, and other writers, face as a writer, mother, wife, and educator.

In further examining Olsen’s life, an important difference that may set Olsen’s experiences apart from others emerges. As an immigrant, Olsen learned quickly that although the United States is referred to as the land of promise, there are also divisions that are created due to social, racial, economic, and sexual factors. Therefore, as Elaine Orr writes, Olsen’s “first memoirs were colored by labor struggles, the realities of the workplace, the desire of laborers for a job and dignity, and a growing American socialism” (5). In experiencing and witnessing the struggles of laborers just like herself and her parents, Olsen was unwilling to remain an onlooker. Through her writing, which offers alternatives to those suffering, she was determined to alter the course of their lives. Orr discusses Olsen’s experiences during her youth as she explains that “Woven into Olsen’s young consciousness...was...her parents’ immigrant identity; the Yiddish ideal of enlightenment, the embodied, and a spirit of hope, for freedom and justice that had imbued their lives in Russia” (5). This hope for freedom and justice which had been

instilled in her by her parents became a driving force for Olsen. Furthermore, it is also important to recognize that “Olsen wrote for all those silenced, and for all those not silenced. In her view, the achievement of those who were not silenced (including herself) bore witness by its very existence to what might have been, in the shadows of what never was” (*Silences* xii). As a writer who has successfully lifted herself out of the silences from which she once suffered, Olsen carries a personal importance in her writing ability.

This ability enables her to focus on the interiority of her subjects and provide a direct representation of her subject matter and characters within her fiction. With her successes and the attention that she is able to capture, she calls attention to what is *not* receiving attention—the works that individuals were unable to produce or that were produced but ignored. With each text that is recognized as a success, one must consider how many people were not provided with the time to spend on a pursuit more ambitious or gain the support to explore creative impulses, rather than worrying about putting food on the table, a roof over their head, and tending to every need of their children as Eva must do in “Tell Me a Riddle.” Writing represents one form of the “solitude” that Eva reflects upon earlier as it is a form that is opposed to the concerns that compete with the tending of the interior worlds Olsen illustrates. By providing readers with autobiographical details in her texts, including herself as a female, a mother, a first-generation Jewish-American, and a marginalized individual, Olsen offers readers an example of the potential that those who are silenced and ignored carry.

Mickey Pearlman and Abby H. P. Werlock, in their text *Tillie Olsen*, discuss Olsen’s writing as they look more closely at how she represents her marginal character’s subjectivities. They state, “Through her writing, she has forced us to pay attention to the influence of economic

circumstance and social class; the meaning of limited time, money, energy, and space on the productivity of women; the nature and pain of imposed silence; and the often debilitating effects of ‘otherness’ in a society that equates difference with disability, sameness with society” (ix). In this statement, both authors bring into view a number of important points. The authors identify that Olsen does not only show what happens as a result of economic status and social class, but how these factors influence the lives of such people and what “the meaning of” limited resources is. While this distinction may appear minor, it is quite significant in the context of Olsen’s work and personal purpose as a writer. For Olsen, it is not important enough to simply see how difficult some people’s lives are. It is important that readers also see how limited resources, economic circumstances, social classes, gender roles, and “otherness” alter the path of one’s life. While the man in the meatpacking factory or the homemaker caring for her children may appear simply as cogs in a wheel, the reality is that their skills were unable to be developed, or, as Olsen terms it, they were “silenced” (*Silences* 7). This lack of understanding can be considered in relation to Pearlman and Werlock’s thought about disability as outsiders think that because some individuals are unlike them, they are disabled or incapable of participating. As Olsen illustrates the interiority of her characters, she attempts to render the inner lives of marginal characters legible in their own terms of self-understanding by those outside of these circumstances in order to counter this thought pattern. It is not that other skills, intelligences or desires are not present; it is that the opportunity to explore such things was not available to them. Olsen’s point is that this should not make one human being inferior to the next.

In this section of their text, Pearlman and Werlock highlight many important points; however, these ideas must be taken one step further. Olsen does not stop at simply showing

readers what happens as a result of limited resources or what the meaning of these are, she goes beyond this by offering alternative options. These options are not always directed at the individual character she is referring to, and instead are intended for those who are reading the text that may be part of the segment of society that determines what, and who, deserves attention, respect, and appreciation. For example, while Olsen uses Eva in “Tell Me a Riddle” as a figure that provides an alternative option for individuals who are suffering from marginality themselves, in *Yonnondio*, she is speaking more directly at those who are not silenced. This is visible when Mazie asks her father “Pop, does the boss man honest have a white shiny tub bigger than you and he turns something and the water comes out? Or is it a story? And does he honest have a toilet right inside the house? And silks on the floor?” (*Yonnondio* 12). This scene can be looked at in conjunction with the scene in which Anna, Mazie, and the other children go for a walk through an unfamiliar neighborhood. As they walk, “a vague shame, a weedy sense of not belonging, of something being wrong about them, stirred uneasy through Mazie” (141). By including these questions and interior thoughts, Olsen pushes readers to look more closely at their own lives, the luxuries that they take for granted, and the way their judgments impact others. While a tub with a faucet or an indoor restroom may seem like a given for many people, Olsen puts these directly in the readers view in an effort to cause them to take a second look at their lifestyle in comparison to others. This represents another effort made by Olsen to push individuals to think beyond associating “difference with disability.” Furthermore, the inner thoughts with which readers are provided offer a rare look at the shame that stems from the normative values created by society. Linda Ray Pratt, in her introduction to *Yonnondio: From the Thirties*, writes, the “portrait of the misery of poverty and the difficulties of motherhood jolts

readers out of their comfort zone” (xiv). In creating such a startling picture and reflection, Olsen hopes to have readers consider what their role is in consideration of those who are silenced and what they can do to discontinue that suffering.

The Visible and the Invisible in Interior Representations

In further exploring Olsen’s fiction writing, one must look closely at the characters that she introduces. As a working class family in America during the 1920’s and 1930’s, the Holbrooks within *Yonnonidio: From the Thirties* represent the sector of society that are undervalued and unacknowledged. As contributors to society, working in mines, factories and farms, Jim and the other men within this class help to support society, risking their lives to supply the men and women of the United States with goods, while also working “to make a few fat bellies fatter” (*Yonnonidio* 8). As Olsen illustrates, the conditions within the mines and factories are horrid. These conditions create fear for both the men and their families as the mine whistle serves as a constant reminder of the likelihood of death. Olsen describes the effect that the whistles have on Mazie, revealing, “The whistles always woke Mazie. They pierced into her sleep like some guttural-voiced metal beast, tearing at her; breathing a terror. During the day if the whistle blew, she knew it meant death—somebody’s poppa or brother, perhaps her own—in that fearsome place below the ground, the mine” (*Yonnonidio* 1). While the whistle is symbolic of the physical death that these men risk, Olsen also introduces the figurative loss that the men suffer, as their hopes and dreams dissolve upon their employment at the mine.

Andy Kvaternick, who is forced to become a mine worker after his father’s death, is representative of this type of loss: “Your father had dreams. You too, like all boys, had dreams—vague dreams, of freedom and light and cheering throngs and happiness. The earth will

take those too. You will leave them in, to replace the coal ... Earth takes your dreams, that a few may languidly lie on couches and trill 'How exquisite' to paid dreamers" (*Yonnondio* 7). As the men jeopardize their lives in order to increase another man's wealth, they distance themselves from their dreams and become machines. Though individuals like Jim and Andy have dreams of their own which they hope to one day achieve, the men must put these aside in order to provide for their families. As Olsen describes her own suppression in *Silences* which she experiences as a result of her role as mother and wife, Jim is under similar pressure as the provider of a lower-class, economically unstable family. The owners are unconcerned with the conditions that the men must endure and dismiss the value of their role. They are simply expected to do their work and accomplish their goal. Their dreams are subtracted from them, as they "had" dreams, and they continue to empty their hopes and leave them in the earth. Just as machines have no emotion, no "cheering throngs and happiness," neither do the men any longer. By reducing the value of the men and their dreams, their work environment drains them of their human spirit. Little, if any, measures are taken to improve these conditions under which the men work as society ignores this group of individuals.

Looking at Olsen's representation of such characters, it is significant to also look at her writing style and the way in which she has chosen to convey her messages. This can be accomplished through analysis of her use of modernist writing techniques, such as her focus on capturing the movement of ordinary subjects, the use of language as it is spoken, as well as her use of multiple perspectives and various modes of representation. Olsen uses these to appeal to reader's sense of decency and humanity in an effort to achieve equality for all humans.

Additionally, throughout *Yonnondio*, Olsen uses these modernist writing techniques to provide a

deeper and more thorough understanding of her characters' marginality. Each of these are vital to her ability to move away from the realist writing style, and represent a new, modern style of writing that reveals the marginality from which the working-class people suffer. David Harvey provides a discussion that is helpful to analyzing Olsen's decision to focus on capturing the movement of ordinary subjects. In his analysis of the modernist artist, Harvey refers to the French poet Charles Baudelaire and his definition of the artist, writing:

...[Baudelaire defines the] artist as someone who can concentrate his or her vision on ordinary subjects of city life, understand their fleeting qualities, and yet extract from the passing moment all the suggestions of eternity it contains. The successful modern artist was one who could find the universal and the eternal, 'distil the bitter or heady flavor of the wine of life' from the 'ephemeral, the fleeting forms of beauty in our day' (Baudelaire, 1981, 435). To the degree that modernist art managed to do that it became our art, precisely because 'it is the one art that responds to the scenario of our chaos' (Bradbury and McFarlane, 1976, 27). (20)

Harvey and Baudelaire's definition of how the modernist artist creates is important to understanding how Olsen makes possible the perception of the Holbrook's marginality. As Olsen focuses on these marginalized characters, she captures their reality that often goes unnoticed by the rest of society. She does so as she not only represents these figures in the moment, but makes suggestions of a hopeful future for the Holbrook family. In doing so, she is able to capture the interior details of the Holbrook's lives, while also demonstrating how they are representative of a larger group of individuals. Also, Olsen's representation of these "ordinary subjects" through their migration from location to location and their struggle to attain resources for their family and secure jobs makes it possible to show "the scenario of [their] chaos," rather than the chaos in itself. In representing the "scenario" of chaos that both men point to, Olsen does not oversimplify their lives as disorder, but illustrates its complicated nature.

Olsen also employs the use of multiple perspectives, in addition to her focus on the movement of ordinary subjects. One example is Olsen's presentation of information in a way that forces readers to draw connections. In his chapter "Modernity and Modernism" Harvey provides an opportunity to analyze her decision to do so. He argues:

Modernism from its very beginning, therefore, became preoccupied with language, with finding some special mode of representation of eternal truths. Individual achievement depended upon innovation in language and in modes of representation, with the result that the modernist work, as Lunn (1985, 41) observes, 'often willfully reveals its own reality as a construction or an artifice,' thereby transforming much of art into a 'self-referential construct rather than a mirror of society.' (20-21)

Within the quote taken from Lunn, Harvey points to an important distinction between the modernist, or "self-referential construct," and realist, or "mirror," modes of representation. While realism works to paint a mimetic portrait of society, the modern artist alters this by refusing to simply "mirror" society. To do so, the modernist writer pushes its readers to question the very connection being made within the text, rather than passively accept the representation that is provided. Olsen does so as she shifts from perspective to perspective, using different voices without connections. It is then the reader's responsibility to draw the connections and identify the meaning behind these movements. Additionally, these tools, the "self-referential construct" and "mirror" mode, give a certain representation—an aware position that literary constructs are constructs; however, Olsen takes up these modernist forms and applies them as devices that allow her to accomplish her goals. Therefore, rather than use these tools as an exploration of forms to represent the structure of the devices, she applies them in order to represent the specific content and subject matter of her texts which is the interiority of her characters.

Moreover, in looking at Olsen's "preoccup[ation] with language" it is important to recognize that she is preoccupied with the everyday ordinary language of the characters that occupy her texts, which is specifically linked to their lives. This demonstrates Olsen's commitment to representing a certain kind of "truth" – the interiority that belongs to these characters. This is significant because the characters that she puts at the center of her works are the types that would be designated marginal in contemporary sociology. Harvey also articulates that the artist must "represent the eternal through an instantaneous effect, making 'shock tactics and the violation of expected continuities' vital to the hammering home of the message that the artist sought to convey" (21). Olsen captures this "shock tactic" and "violation of expected continuities" as she employs multiple voices that disrupt the flow of the text. Rather than identify the voices and show the connection that the speaker has to that section of the novel, Olsen provides no explanation and the reader must then construct it.

In addition, by doing so, Olsen makes it possible to represent her characters' interiority. For example, rather than utilize a single perspective of the conditions and experiences of the Holbrook family, Olsen provides readers with the character's internal thoughts and feelings. Mazie thinks to herself "Oh it's us again, it's us. Then in clenching fear: Now something bad's going to have to happen. Again" (*Yonnonadio* 154). Though Mazie is experiencing happiness and excitement, she understands how temporary this moment is for her family as their lives are constantly in jeopardy. While it would not be expected that a girl of Mazie's age would carry such concern, Olsen presents these through Mazie's thoughts in order to convey to readers the impact that the Holbrook's marginality has on them. Because her characters are coded as occupying marginal positions in society, Olsen prioritizes the representation of their interiority.

In relation to Olsen's use of this modernist technique, Harvey discusses a shift in modernism's tone, finding:

this particular surge of modernism, therefore, had to recognize the impossibility of representing the world in a single language. Understanding had to be considered through the exploration of multiple perspectives. Modernism, in short, took multiple perspectivism and relativism as its epistemology for revealing what it still took to be the true nature of a unified, though complex, underlying reality. (30)

By learning the characters' thoughts, readers are shown the reality of the Holbrook's situation.

Rather than receive this "understanding," as Harvey explains, through the lens of a single perspective, the narrator has omniscient power to provide the characters' thoughts and feelings.

This narrative mediates the text, just as Olsen mediates in the earlier section. This works to deepen the character's significance as it places direct focus on each. Instead of portraying the Holbrooks as victims and focus on the difficulty of the character's lives, Olsen captures the voice within and, in doing so, gives the character agency while acknowledging the efforts that they are making to move from their current position. Furthermore, through Olsen's depiction of the Holbrook family, which is intended to call attention to the individuals within society that are socially marginalized, as well as their multiple perspectives, she shows how their reality may be similar, or "unified," but that there is not one single representation of the reality of all working-class individuals as they have varying degrees of complexity that create differences.

Robert E. Park makes a similar argument which supports the significance of the representation of characters' minds, declaring, "It is, therefore, in the mind of the marginal man that the process of civilization is visibly going on, and it is in the mind of the marginal man that the process of civilization must be studied" (881). Park's view that the process of civilization is taking place in the mind of the marginal man, and therefore must be studied there, allows for the

modernist style of writing to be discussed here in relation to Harvey's piece as it pushes readers to question the representation that is provided, rather than simply accept it. By choosing to supply the character's thoughts in regard to their situation, readers are given more than a "mirror of society," as Harvey calls it, and instead are able to see the process of civilization that is taking place. One part of this process is the struggle that the Holbrook family experiences. Olsen provides these understandings through the thoughts and minds of the characters in order to supply readers with an interior view of their lives. The narrator steps inside of the mind of Anna and Jim, revealing: "We'll work things out you'll see, don't take on so. Hearing only the attempt at comfort. And now your father lies beside her, stroking and kissing her hair, silently making old vows again, vows that life will never let keep" (*Yonnondio* 130). Though Jim hopes to be able to "work things out" and take care of his family, these attempts are often met with failure. However, as the Holbrooks attempt to improve the conditions of their lives and navigate society's control, they are demonstrating the process of civilization that Harvey is referring to.

As Olsen sheds light upon those who are ignored and forgotten, she exposes the depth of their character and rejects the oversimplification created by society. In *Yonnondio*, Olsen does so through her interior focus on her characters, but more specifically that of Mazie and Anna. Park introduces the concept of the "marginal man" in relation to migration. Within his framework, migration necessarily involves leaving a place and severing ties with the people of that location; it is "not to be identified with mere movement" (Park 886). This letting go of the past allows for the individual to experience changes in his or her character. As the Holbrook family struggles to find financial stability and security, they migrate from place to place, traveling from a Wyoming mining town, to a rural farm in South Dakota, and finally to the city

of Omaha. Prior to their departure from each location, the family carries hope “to begin a new life” (*Yonnonidio* 21) and once they begin their journey, “the Holbrooks do not look back” (32). In looking ahead to their future endeavors and severing ties with what they are leaving behind, the Holbrook family follows the type of migration that Park outlines in his argument, and have opened themselves to the possibility of a change in their character. This change is what Park refers to as “enlightenment.” He explains that an individual who migrates to another location and removes his or herself from their past experiences changes in their character and becomes “not only emancipated, but enlightened” (888).

Within *Yonnonidio*, Mazie and Anna, in particular, show that they are in the process of undergoing such “enlightenment.” Both women are represented as developing the capacity to think and perceive their environment through multiple perspectives due to their movement. Olsen captures this progression and constructs their consciousness through her use of multiple perspectives as she shows that Anna and Mazie both recognize that the world is populated by views that are outside of their own and they look at their personal experiences from multiple angles. Moreover, these women are aware of their marginal status because they are reflective of their experiences. As a young female growing up during a time when education is a luxury and women suffer severe oppression as they are forced to remain within the domestic sphere, Mazie is made aware of the difficulties that life possesses. Rather than remain complacent with her position, she strives for more, looking closely at the knowledge she does and does not have, hoping to “have that learnin’ someday” (*Yonnonidio* 5). At various points throughout the novel, she demonstrates her desire to escape the role that is outlined for her, as she sees herself heading down a similar path to that of her mother. She first reveals this when she reflects on her

knowledge, thinking, “I am Mazie Holbrook. I am aknowin things. I can diaper a baby. I can tell ghost stories. I know words and words. Tipple. Edjication. Bug dust. Supertendent...The sun is makin a fire on me, but it is not black. Some color I am not knowen it is, but I’ll have that learnin’ someday” (5). In this self-reflective moment, Mazie works to build her own reality. Rather than remain content with her level of understanding, she is exhibiting use of multiple perspectives and shows hope and desire for continuing to further her knowledge.

Mazie also demonstrates her ongoing growth when she joins her mother and siblings on a walk to a neighborhood outside of their own to find dandelions. As they walk, “a vague shame, a weedy sense of not belonging, of something being wrong about them, stirred uneasy through Mazie” (141). Mazie experiences this “sense of not belonging” and attempts to get her mother to leave the neighborhood; however, this “sense” is more than a feeling—Mazie is able to discern the strong differences between her family’s social class and those within this “wrong” neighborhood. She recognizes the humiliation that she and her family are vulnerable to within the wealthier neighborhood and she attempts to protect them from this by returning her family to their home as she repeatedly tells her mother “*Ma, this isn’t the way*” (142). Mazie further exhibits her awareness of her family’s position and how it differs from others around her while on a walk with her father, Jim. As they walk, Mazie becomes curious, asking, “Pop, does the boss man honest have a white shiny tub bigger than you and he turns something and the water comes out? Or is it a story? And does he honest have a toilet right inside the house? And silks on the floor?...How come he aint livin like we do? How come we aint livin like him, Pop?” (12). Rather than see the example that her family has set for her as the only option for herself, Mazie makes an astute observation, realizing that there are other paths, and perspectives, and that she

must strive for these. Her curiosity not only leads to her discerning the stark differences between her family's class and those in other classes, but it also causes her to question *why* they do not live a similar lifestyle. In moving from realization to questioning, Mazie furthers her development of multiple perspectives.

Anna similarly demonstrates her movement toward this growth as the family migrates from site to site. While she is often beaten, disrespected, and devalued by her husband, Anna shows progress as she works from the simple realization of the importance of education for her children to a way of making this dream come true with the resources she possesses. Throughout the novel, Anna asserts her concern for her children and the desire to assist them in moving beyond the social position that she and her husband are in. After becoming ill, Anna moves from consciousness to unconsciousness, expressing her worry, stating, "The children. The children. What's going to happen with them? How we going to look out for them in this damn world? Oh Jim, the children. Seems like we can't do nothing for them" (130). Though it appears that Anna has reached a breaking point in which she has lost all hope for creating a better life for her children, this represents the beginning of Anna's "enlightenment." Previously, Anna had been focused on obtaining access to a traditional American education, rather than working with the resources that she has in order to enhance the intelligence of her children in any way possible. Anna discovers that using the knowledge that she has access to is the best way to foster growth. The narrator explains:

One afternoon Anna cleans up her kids and brings them to her Temple of Learning. A squat dirty converted storefront (good enough for packingtown they said) shelved with opiates and trash and marvels (from which most of the children are already turned in outraged self-respect, for is it not through books, the printed word, or so it seemed, that they had been judged poor learners, dumb, dumb dumb?) Told: what is in us has nothing to do with you...She took out a library card for each. (155)

Though the passage shows the exclusion that the Holbrook children suffer as a result of society labeling them “dumb, dumb, dumb,” the children use their creativity as a way of resisting the social environment they are in. The children suffer from alienation, but they discover something new from their trip to the library—that there are alternative forms through which they can receive learning and derive intelligence. This moment is described in the italicized section which follows, revealing, “*Already the conjurer is working spells on Anna’s children. Subtly into waking and dreaming, into imagination and everyday doings and play, shaping, altering them*” (155-156). Following this passage, in which the narrator points to a change in the children’s behavior, they demonstrate this altered behavior by discovering ways to find items that they both want and need. For example, Mazie and Will “stalk” the ice trucks to catch the falling pieces of ice, and Mazie gains access to Ginella’s tent through her strategic finds at the dump. This progression stems from the Holbrooks’ realization that the skills they have and will develop carry important value as well, regardless of what society has determined. Though Anna may not be able to change her position in life, she feels hope and creates opportunities for growth for Will, Mazie, Jimmie and Ben. While Anna’s transition is not absolute, it demonstrates the progress that Anna has made in transitioning from simply existing to taking action.

As Park continues to develop the concept of the marginal man, he transitions to referring to such individuals as a “personality type” (893). Park argues that while “there are no doubt periods of transition and crisis in the lives of most of us that are comparable with those which the immigrant experiences when he leaves home to seek his fortunes in a strange country, in the case of the marginal man the period of crisis is relatively permanent. The result is that he tends to become a personality type” (893). His use of the term “personality type” is significant. While

this theory allows readers to see that the Holbrook family is an example of a larger class of marginalized people, it is important that they are not reduced to a stereotype. Olsen prevents the characters from being oversimplified as she illustrates the emancipation that both Mazie and Anna experience. Mazie's determination to resist the lifestyle that she has witnessed and strive for increased understanding contributes to her movement beyond such a label. Similarly, through Anna's attempt at assisting her children in finding an escape and sense of worth of some form, Anna also demonstrates her movement toward developing multiple perspectives and becoming a more complicated character that is representative of a larger group.

Furthermore, within *Yonnonidio*, the patriarchal structure imposed by society plays an important role as it forces Jim, Anna, and Mazie into their roles as father, mother, and surrogate parent. As a result, these characters are unhappy with their positions and feel trapped.

Philosopher Martin Heidegger introduces the term "dwelling" in relation to the existence of man. Dwelling, according to Heidegger, is the condition in which things and people have the ability to exist properly and allow his or her true nature to exist. As the male figure in the household, Jim must serve as the main provider for his family, working under extremely unfavorable conditions in the mine, factory and farm. These sites represent non-genuine buildings in which individuals are unable to dwell. The lives of the workers within the factory are described:

Abandon self, all ye who enter here. Become component part, geared, meshed, timed, controlled...the same motion all the hours through: Kryckszi lifting his cleaver, the one powerful stroke; long continuous arm swirl of the rippers, gut pullers; Marsalek pulling leaf lard...And over and over the one constant motion—ruffle fat pullers, pluck separators, bladder, kidney, bung, small and middle gut cutters, cleaners, trimmers, slimers, flooders, inflators—*meshed geared*. (*Yonnonidio* 165-166)

In this description, the workers, such as Kryckzi, Marsalek and Jim, are dehumanized as the factory transforms them into a different shape. They are no longer themselves, but have become an extension of the machine where they are “component part, geared, meshed, timed, controlled” as their body movements are predetermined for them. They cannot follow their “true self” and, as a result, are not capable of dwelling. Whereas Jim is unable to dwell within the work space, his wife, Anna, is required to remain within the home space and manage all matters pertaining to the family and children, rather than pursue her dreams or hopes. In analyzing the text through Heidegger’s conception of dwelling, it is clear that as a result of the strict roles that Anna and Jim must fill, they are unable to follow their true nature, and, thus, are unable to dwell. This traditional patriarchal structure of the family further contributes to their alienation because their identification with their dictated role appears absolute. Olsen represents the marginality of the Holbrook family through their exclusion from the form of being that Heidegger has outlined.

However, through her demonstration of the patriarchal structure, Olsen explores potential new forms of dwelling, rather than lamenting the loss of older forms of being. When Anna becomes ill and is unable to fill her role as homemaker, Jim deviates from the traditional structure and helps to feed the family by cooking dinner. During this time, the traditional structure is altered in order to meet the circumstances, and thus exhibits a new form of dwelling that is more appropriate for the modern world. Likewise, Anna alters the traditional structure, demonstrating a new form of being. When Jim is unable to provide the necessary resources for his family, Anna finds additional work laundering clothing in order to do so. Through Anna’s decision to take a more dominant role in providing for her family, Olsen is further suggesting a

learning to dwell in new ways. Both Anna and Jim's deviation from their dictated positions signifies that these roles may not be absolute.

Heidegger further discusses the "plight of dwelling," writing, "The real dwelling plight lies in this, that mortals ever search anew for the nature of dwelling, that they *must ever learn to dwell*" (161). Olsen does not present the Holbrooks as people that are stuck in stasis where they will never be able to potentially become dwellers; instead, they are characters that continue to search for ways to dwell and work toward learning how to do so. This is exemplified by Jim and Anna's removal from their predetermined roles and their shift into another. Rather than focus on the hopelessness of the Holbrook family in *Yonnonidio*, Tillie Olsen illuminates the factors that have contributed to their social position and pushes readers to consider society's role in determining it. While these characters can be reduced to "types," Olsen prevents this from happening by capturing their reality and highlighting the Holbrook's attempts to move beyond such a simplified understanding.

Empowerment, Inspiration, and Possibility: Tillie Olsen's Impact as Mediator and Activist

With Olsen's efforts to provide readers with a deeper understanding of her characters and her position as an individual who once suffered her own exclusion, she occupies a unique position. As Olsen entered the academic world, she became a valuable mediator between those who suffer marginalization and the professional literary world that sets the standard for what texts deserve attention. Olsen pursued this position and used it to pull those who are seemingly invisible into the spotlight. Through her reading lists from her time spent as a professor at Amherst College, Stanford University, MIT, and Kenyon College, the support and tools she has made available for those excluded can be demonstrated and examined. Olsen worked as an

activist to legitimize the people and texts she introduces and discusses. As a result, her work as a teacher and critic renders these works recognizable on their own terms. Olsen's reading lists, which have been uncovered, offer important insight into her impact on the literary canon and the feminist movement while also reflecting how Olsen wrote about those in positions of marginalization. Though this may appear as a rather minor document in the life of a writer, for Olsen this was much more. She saw the publication of her reading lists as an opportunity to further her goal of including individuals that go unnoticed. By publishing these documents, Olsen formalized her language of daily life. She utilizes this language that is specific to her characters' everyday lives and as a result illustrates their interiority. She is further able to provide a very specific representation of her characters and subject matter by utilizing realist modes of representation and modernist constructs, not to simply provide a mirror of society which represents the structure of the devices, but to focus on the interiority of her characters. Such actions lead Olsen to her position as an activist and mediator.

During her time spent in English departments at various universities, Olsen challenged the narrow scope of the accepted canon of the time that was reflected in typical reading lists and course syllabi. Rather than adhere to such expectations, Olsen included in her "syllabi texts that reflected the breadth of human experience" (Allyn and Iker). On this list, which is annotated by Olsen herself, it is necessary to pay close attention to the divisions that she has included. While she begins with the typical headings of "Novels" and "Stories," section two's divisions are more specific, including "Lives," "From 100-Year-Old Women," "Slaves, Servants, Servers," "Some Women in Works By Men," and "Rape, Brutality, Degradations, Prostitution." These subjects of

rape, brutality, degradation and prostitution are those that reflect this “breadth of human experience” because they highlight the publicly muted, “degraded,” extent of human experience.

Also, her selections are very pointed and decisive, offering her students and those looking back upon it insight into the things that she valued as she further provides points to keep in mind while her students tackle the selected literature. She writes under the section entitled “Most Women’s Lives:”

Lives, history, realities largely absent from literature (read as balancer, corrective, of prevalent images of women as protected, passive, parasitic, decorative, narcissistic, primarily sex object, "the other," etc.) . Each entry should be read with the following in mind. 1) The hard and essential work of women, in and out of the home ("no work was too hard, no labour too strenuous to exclude us") . 2) Limitations, denials imposed; exclusions and restrictions in no way necessitated by biological or economic circumstances. 3) How human capacities born in women - intellect, organization, art, invention, vision, sense of justice, beauty, etc. - denied scope and development, nevertheless struggled to express themselves and function. ("Tillie Olsen's Reading Lists I-IV").

These three reading questions give students a point at which to begin analyzing the assigned texts, but in a way that they may not have done previously. During an interview included in “The Tillie Olsen Project,” a collection compiled by Amherst College students Katherine Allyn and Annemarie Iker that looks closely at Tillie Olsen’s life and work, including interviews of Olsen’s former students, editors, and family members, Heath Moore, one of her former students, describes her, revealing, “Tillie Olsen taught me and other people to respect the one-to-one relationship that people experience, not just to distill things into the academic intellectual discussion. Yes, approach learning from the level of human experience not distilled academic discourse. And that’s really the most valuable thing I got from her” (Allyn and Iker). This is a significant reflection because it explains how, although Olsen was teaching a literature course,

she did much more than discuss literature. She provided students with the skills to bring two differentiated approaches to learning which serve different purposes and values. One way Olsen suggested to approach learning is through the lens of human experience; the second she proposed is through academic discourse which involves distancing oneself from experience and basing it on intellectual understandings. Olsen was able to bring a heightened consciousness to her students and push them to look beneath the lens of “academic discourse.” This student’s statement speaks to the realization that established “academic discourse” can be supplemented by other ways of understanding “human experience.” In calling attention to the way that human capacities were denied and what this causes or the way factors beyond economics or biology created limitations for the characters, Olsen pushed students to not simplistically examine the characters through the dominant academic values but to deeply consider the surrounding factors that such values may exclude.

Olsen’s impact goes beyond just her reading lists as it also derives from her writing. In reading through her non-fiction text *Silences*, it becomes clear that it is a unique text. As she explores the gaps in literary theory and the canon, as well as the forces that prevent certain individuals from creating, she utilizes a diverse collection of testimonies, diaries, texts, and letters. Through these, theorists and scholars alike have been profoundly impacted. In her introduction to *Silences*, Shelley Fisher Fishkin writes: “*Silences* changed what we read in the academy, what we write, and what we count; it also gave us some important tools to understand and address many of the literary, social, economic and political silencings of the present and the potential silencings of the future” (*Silences* xii). As these statements explain, Olsen’s writing impacts not only the way we read, but the way we write and the things that society deems as

significant. Moreover, as we again think more deeply about Olsen's intentions as a writer and advocate, it is necessary to acknowledge that, as Fishkin says, her writing provided "important tools" to understand the "silencings" both currently and in the future. This confirms Olsen's success in not simply presenting the difficulties of her character's lives, but instead pushing readers to better "understand and address many of the literary, social, economic and political silencing[s]."

Fishkin continues, stating, "The critical habits it encouraged and helped instill are still with us in the classroom and in the bookstore, informing what literature is read and taught and the ways in which it is interpreted and evaluated. The problems and dangers Olsen underlines show no signs of disappearing, and her analysis remains as contemporary today as it was when it was first written" (*Silences* xii). As students enter their higher education English courses, many of the texts that they will read derive from Olsen's reading list and are some of the most commonly assigned texts today. It is Fishkin's belief, and is further demonstrated by society, that this is because the issues Olsen highlights with these texts are as relevant today as they were decades ago. While this may appear disheartening because it reflects that these problems still exist, it is also reflective of the significance of these texts, and Olsen's influence, because they remain germane today.

In addition, Olsen's reading lists worked to inspire the inclusion of texts and authors that had been removed from publication. In the introduction to "Tell Me a Riddle," Rosenfelt discusses Olsen's lists and how she used these to expand the academic list of texts and authors to be taught. She writes, "[Olsen] compiled influential reading lists of neglected writings for the *Radical Teacher* and the *Women's Studies Newsletter*, and she helped identify 'lost' texts for

reprinting by The Feminist Press, the first of many small presses devoted to the writings of women” (11). This demonstrates that not only was Olsen able to inspire attention for these texts, but she was also able to position herself in a way that allowed her to bring these selected works back into production so that they would not remain “lost.” In doing so, these works have now become recognizable today. The familiarity that readers have of these writers presently speaks to the way Olsen was able to generate attention for and appreciation of them.

Rosenfelt further explores Olsen’s impact, writing, “An important influence on the feminist writers, critics and students of the seventies and eighties, Olsen has also contributed to ‘the larger tradition of social concern’ both as a writer of fiction and a scholar and teacher whose efforts have been crucial to the democratization of the American literary canon” (“Tell Me a Riddle” 12). As Olsen introduced her selected texts to her students and those around her, she impacted the American literary canon by making it a space that was more accepting of texts that formerly would have been rejected. This allowed students and teachers to step outside of the common and conventional and explore various writers and genres, thus creating inclusion rather than exclusion. Likewise, as Rosenfelt points out, Olsen also “contributed to ‘the larger tradition of social concern.’” This is a significant detail because it highlights the achievement of one of Olsen’s goals as a writer and human being: to provide a space in which those who have been forgotten are included, and to heighten people’s awareness and concern about their own treatment of others, including those less fortunate than themselves.

This activist position which Olsen held is an important one to look at more closely and can be seen in her intervention in academic discourse and the literary canon. Mary Jane Moffat and Charlotte Painter are writers who had a large interest in Olsen’s work and benefitted because

of her support and the inclusion of their texts. Moffat and Painter are the editors of *Revelations: Diaries of Women* which offers excerpts from the diaries of various women, both well-known and unknown. Moffat wrote to Olsen in 1973 to relay the impact that her attention to neglected genres, such as diaries and letters, had on the publication of their text. She writes, “My Diaries course, which would never have happened but for you, was wonderful...Charlotte Painter & I are preparing a collection of extracts from women’s diaries & letters for Random House...I think of you as ‘Tillie Appleseed.’ Generations will thank you as I do now, far too sparingly” (*Silences* xix). The appreciation that Moffat expresses in this letter is an important example of the empowerment that writers have received due to Olsen’s work. Moreover, this reference and connection made to Johnny Appleseed offers significant insight to the way Moffat felt about Olsen. Appleseed was responsible for introducing apple trees to Ohio, Illinois, and Indiana, but his legend describes him as a man who donated apple seeds around the United States in order to bring apples, and the enjoyment of those apples, to many people (Price). While this may appear to be a rather extended connection, the reality is that both Olsen and Appleseed, according to his legend, have done something very similar. Just as Appleseed is thought to have selflessly spread apple seeds throughout the United States in an effort to bring enjoyment and appreciation of such an item, Olsen has also fought selflessly to help provide those who are unacknowledged and silenced the platform and attention that they need and deserve. As scholars and students continue to study Tillie Olsen’s works and those that she helped gain inclusion, the concerns of marginalization, suppression, and societal judgment continue to gain focus and attention. These concerns have now become central to “academic discourse” and further support Olsen’s role as mediator.

This pattern of changes that were inspired by the work of Tillie Olsen began to be institutionalized during the 1970's and 1980's. In his article, "Reconstructing American Literature: A Synopsis of an Educational Project of the Feminist Press," Paul Lauter introduces the goals and reasons for the Educational Project being conducted by the Feminist Press during the 1980's. In his efforts to do so, Lauter first looks deeply at the teaching of American Literature in American universities and colleges over the course of the prior two decades. Lauter reflects upon this time, writing:

Although access to higher education widened spectacularly in the United States, especially after World War II, the versions of American culture taught at all levels have largely remained narrow. In fact, viewed historically, the definition of American literature in particular constricted substantially in the decades after the first World War; only within the last ten years has that process begun to be reversed. Now, we face the possibility, in some proposals to return to "Great Books" courses and traditional "Masters," of another reversal. (34)

As Latuer points out, not until the 1970's did the definition of American Literature begin to widen and include texts of a different sort. Up until this point, the scope of accepted texts were quite limited and excluded the works of female writers, as well as those of minorities written by men and women. Consequently, the perspective that college students received through their literature courses was narrow in scope and offered very little understanding of those who were not included in the academic discourse. Lauter highlights this idea, stating, "Beginning in the 1920s, 'American Literature' became an academic discipline consciously developed and dominated by a rather small group of professors and critics, essentially homogeneous in background and outlook. Their tastes and interests naturally shaped the view of the past... the picture of American culture which they drew was exceedingly limited" (Lauter 34). As a result of this dominating picture that was created by such a small segment of society that had one very

particular perspective, those who were on the periphery did not exist in American Literature.

Due to this lack of representation given to certain segments of society based upon gender, economics, and race, the significance, understanding, and perspective of such individuals was ignored and excluded from view. Lauter offers an example of the topics that were excluded:

Hunting – a bear or a whale - supposedly provided paradigms for coming of age and for ‘human’ exploration, whereas menstruation, pregnancy and birthing did not. The battlefield and the bull ring became the arenas for heroism. But ‘heroism’ did not extend to the aging spinster struggling in rural Maine for a place to live or to the fugitive's quest for a North of freedom - indeed, literature encoding such themes was seldom seriously studied. (34)

As these texts, struggles, and people were “seldom seriously studied,” they received little attention and consideration. This view is then perpetuated by the students within American Universities which continues the cycle. In limiting the inclusion of realities like pregnancy, birthing, and the struggle for survival, and including the significance of the battlefield and the bull ring, institutions definitive drew a line of legitimacy. This line communicates to readers, students, and other academics that certain writings will receive and deserve attention and others will be disregarded. As Olsen worked during the 1970’s and 80’s, as well as throughout her life, as an activist and mediator, she offers an opportunity for a moment of redefinition of what can and will be taught, studied, and written, making the limitations visible and helping new boundaries to be negotiated.

In order to further understand the literary period during which Olsen was working to make such changes, it is useful to look at the study Lauter introduces which he conducted in 1981 as the Project Director of Reconstructing American Literature. This study looked closely at the selected literature being taught in introductory American Literature courses at universities and colleges in the United States. It was found that “of the 61 authors taught in three or more of

the initial 50 courses surveyed, only eight were women, five were Black men, none were Black women; other minority or ethnic writers did not appear in as many as three of the courses” (Lauter 36). These numbers are extremely important as they explicitly outline the lack of female and minority writers included in the syllabi of American Literature courses across the country during the 1970’s and early 80’s.

As Olsen explains, it is not that such people did not exist or did not write, it is that they were unacknowledged and undervalued. A potential cause, Lauter suggests, is that “Many faculty base their courses on patterns and choices learned in graduate school or imposed by available (and affordable) texts. Further, they are strongly influenced by peer networks and other forms of professional legitimation. Yet valid change in canon and curriculum is, we are clear, needed and possible” (37). There are two important points that are introduced with these statements. Firstly, these provide clarity regarding some of the reasons that American Literature was so limited in scope. Because faculty create their courses based upon factors including the education they received themselves, economic and availability factors of textbooks, and the influence of “professional legitimation” or what other professionals have determined as valid, they are unlikely to step outside of the accepted and familiar texts to which they are so accustomed. Secondly, Lauter offers a note of hope for these realities to change as he points out that alterations in the canon and curriculum are not only necessary but “possible.”

Moreover, looking at Lauter’s research, which he has performed in analysis of this moment, in relation to the readings Olsen had selected and listed on her syllabi provides an opportunity to understand the institutionalization of changes that Olsen was working to inspire. Some of the authors included in Olsen’s reading lists are: Kate Chopin, Virginia Woolf, George

Eliot, D.H. Lawrence, Sylvia Plath, Willa Cather and Alice Walker. While these names may appear particularly familiar, during the 1970's and 1980's when her syllabi were written, such individuals received much less recognition and attention, as Lauter shows. In his analysis of *The Norton Anthology* during the 1960's-1970's, Lauter discovered that, "For the authors included are hardly all that should be. In traditional fashion, the Norton Anthology...omits entirely, among others, Charlotte Perkins Gilman...Zora Neale Hurston...and Alice Walker" (39). *The Norton Anthology* is an important and influential text in the literary field; however, Olsen did not accept the traditional reading lists and texts based upon "professional legitimation," access, or affordability. Instead, she reached beyond this and utilized the positioning she achieved after receiving her awards, including the O. Henry Short Story Award in 1961, National Endowment for the Arts awards, Mari Sandoz Award of the Nebraska Library Association, the \$25,000 Rea Award from the Dungannon Foundation in New York for best short story of 1994, a Radcliffe Institute Fellowship, and a Guggenheim Fellowship, in order to become an activist. As a result, she played a large role in putting specific authors back into publishing.

Many of the authors who benefited directly from Olsen's activism were women and minorities. In their detailed look at Tillie Olsen, Pearlman and Werlock further expound upon the impact that she has had as they discuss her influence on women in particular. Though Olsen also included men in her reading lists, the publication of the lists coincided with and influenced academic acceptance of women's studies. They explain:

She has encouraged women and minorities to write their own stories and to break through the encoded silences that surround the lives of the powerless. Her appearances across the country, where she talks about such silences, empower, support, and encourage writers and women in ways that she herself was not empowered, supported, or encouraged until very late in life. (33)

This idea of encouraging marginalized individuals to write their own stories is extremely important to Olsen's impact on women writers and the canon. She did not want such people to alter their life stories or the texts that they desired to write in order to become a part of what is legitimized in the academic world. Instead, she offers those excluded the tools to decide for themselves what is being ignored and what is important to them.

In returning to one of Lauter's earlier statements regarding topics that were rarely included in academic discourse, Olsen pushed marginalized people to step beyond the accepted topics of the battlefield and the bull ring and explore such things as the realities of pregnancy, the tribulations of survival, and the joys and sorrows of raising children. She then made the tools to do so available. In thinking about Olsen's purpose in her writing in which she aims to offer alternatives to readers, it is important to recognize that she is doing so through her actions as a mediator, activist, and writer. To this end, it becomes clear that Lauter and Olsen are working toward similar goals; while Olsen was an important figure that helped institutionalize changes in academic discourse and the canon, Lauter is attempting to further these changes as he conducts surveys and highlights the need for increased inclusion of all writers and texts. As Olsen engaged in talks and provided hope for those who are "powerless," she offers them a tangible alternative—to continue writing their *own* stories and push through the barriers set ahead of them, just as she did herself. Rather than attempt to persuade those that she was speaking to into changing their intentions of becoming a writer or their writing's focus, she offered her own support and attempted to empower them through her words and the example she has set. As she did so, these individuals begin to develop confidence in themselves and their abilities. This

allowed certain stories to be told and received. Alice Walker is representative of the consequences of the expansion of such subjects.

The increased confidence in both one's abilities and their selected topics which was inspired by Tillie Olsen is exemplified by Alice Walker's voicing of her appreciation of Olsen's work as an activist and mediator. Walker was born in 1944 in a rural part of Georgia to her parents, Willie and Minnie Walker. Though her family was considered poor, they nurtured Walkers' desire to create. She went on to study at Sarah Lawrence College and began writing, eventually publishing works in a number of different genres ("Alice Walker's Official Biography"). As an African American and a female, Walker is representative of the portion of society that has often been considered incapable of producing anything or anyone of value, which Olsen works to represent. Walker describes Olsen, praising her as "a writer of such generosity, she literally saves our lives" (Faulkner 1). Though Walker had the support of her parents and teachers, and as a result faced *less* friction in her pursuit of becoming a writer, in referring to Olsen as a person who has saved her life Walker is paying tribute to the impact that Olsen has had on her ability to become a recognized and appreciated author. Because Olsen did not allow females, minorities, or the less fortunate to remain underestimated, she helped to open a door for Alice Walker into the literary world.

While Walker is well-known for a number of her texts, her most acclaimed novel, *The Color Purple*, was awarded the 1983 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and the National Book Award. She was the first African American woman to win the Pulitzer Prize. *The Color Purple* has also been adapted into a film and musical ("Alice Walker's Official Biography"). As individuals, such as Alice Walker, receive such acclaim, they continue to confirm the significant impact that

Tillie Olsen has had on the canon, literary theory, the feminist movement, and writers themselves. Walker did not stray from her passion to become a writer or the topics she desired to write about, rather she decided what was being silenced and what needed to be given a voice. It is possible to say that without the persistence and commitment that Olsen had to the “the lost, [the] people pushed so far to the edge of society that their lives are recorded in ‘no picture, poem, statement, passing them to the future,’” Alice Walker may not have had the opportunity to pursue her passion and abilities and gain the acclaim that she has (*Yonnondio* V). Walker helps those looking back upon Olsen’s work to understand that she rescues individuals from the depths of silence. Moreover, Walker is representative of the very theory that Olsen explains and explores in *Silences* which reminds readers that it is not that individuals did not write, it is that their work was excluded by those who decide what does and does not deserve attention.

As readers and writers search for a better understanding of their own lives and those of generations before them, Olsen offers her fiction and non-fiction texts as a way to do so. She shines a spotlight on those who are deemed irrelevant, thus providing readers with a window into a world that rarely receives any consideration. When asked what impact she hopes her writing will have, she responds: “The world is so different from the world of their youth and the world of my youth. Still, power is primarily held by people of wealth and position. By and large, class interest still rules in our country. Who are the people who make policy and how do they get there? You may get an elite education, but you don’t learn labor history (which means the lives of most of humanity)” (Cusac). While the world is very different from the world Olsen grew up in, the issues that stem from class elitism still exist. As she continues her answer, she calls attention to those that “make policy” and “how...they get there.” In doing so, she is making note

of the fact that those who receive the type of education that is valued by society by and large do not develop an understanding of “labor history,” which Olsen points out is the lives of most people. Without developing this perspective, but holding political power, the silencing and marginalization that she devotes her writing and life to will continue. By using this space during an interview that continues to be published today, Olsen brings awareness to this issue and furthers her impact on humanity.

As a woman who suffered silencing, but also eventually emerged from such silencing and became a successful writer and professor, Olsen is able to mediate between those who receive an “elite education” and those who “learn about history (which means the lives of most of humanity).” Her position as a member of both segments of society is a unique one as it offers her the opportunity to make the voices of those that have been suppressed heard in academic discourse. When Olsen entered the academic world, she found that it was the discourse of the privileged. Rather than accept this, she moved to transform it. This can be seen particularly in Olsen’s use of language within her texts. In looking at her non-fiction text *Silences* in comparison to that of her fiction literature, *Tell Me a Riddle* and *Yonnondio: From the Thirties*, it becomes clear that there are significant differences in her language use. While in the earlier she uses the language of academic and literary form, such as Standard English, in her latter she utilizes the language of the ordinary, daily life of her characters, including the housewife, the poor, and the uneducated. In this second representation, she then provides readers with a look into the interior lives of her characters. Olsen is able to do so because she knows both languages—that of the educated elite and the marginalized. She then meditates between these two different levels of human experience and thus creates relationality. Olsen pushes readers,

professors, and critics to understand the two languages that she uses in relation to one another. By doing so, she uses her position to break the existing mold that has been outlined by Lauter and make room for those who have been excluded from the literary canon. As seen by the influence of her reading lists and the support she has provided for the marginalized, Olsen has transformed an existing discourse.

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