

A Feminist Reading: Tillie Olsen's "I Stand Here Ironing"

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Question: Using the feminist perspective, how does the narrator describe her relationships and encounters with men in Olsen's "I Stand Here Ironing"?

The relationship between men and women has long been marked by inequality in most parts of the world. Speaking about Western society to be specific, the feminist theorist Zillah R. Eisenstein (49) attributes this inequality to biological reductionism and gender stereotyping: "Woman's distinguishing biological characteristic is her ability to reproduce the species through her body. On the basis of this [biological] capacity she has been excluded from other human activities and contained within a sphere defined as female".

Other feminist thinkers too have long argued how society stereotypes men and women into different roles based on their biological functions. According to Judith Butler (qtd. in Dobie 110), gender is "performative" and a social construct that we all act throughout our lives. The late French feminist thinker Simone deBeauvoir (qtd. in Colenutt 1), in her groundbreaking work 'The Second Sex', too, shared the same sentiment on how gender is a social construct, famously writing: "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman". In the domain of literature, feminist literary critics such as Elaine Showalter (5) have long documented women's great contribution to writing. Such feminist thoughts as above are useful when analysing "I stand here ironing" by the late American author Tillie Olsen (1).

In this story, the narrator laments, while doing her ironing, about her hard life as a mother and a worker. I chose to analyse this short story as it is a powerful story about gender inequality and how it is also a critique against patriarchy, which is the rule of men over women and children in society. In this essay, I will highlight the relationships and encounters between the narrator and the two main men in her life – i.e. the fathers of her children -- and argue that they are fraught with inequality, absence and lacking in intimacy and true companionship. I will then conclude by

stating that despite the hardships and troubled circumstances the narrator is in, she too has agency in shaping her life and is not entirely helpless and this makes her an unlikely heroine.

Firstly, the narrator describes her relationship with the father to her firstborn Emily, as absent and irresponsible, saying: **“She [Emily] was a miracle to me, but when she was eight months old I had to leave her daytimes with the woman downstairs to whom she was no miracle at all, for I worked or looked for work and for Emily's father, who “could no longer endure” (he wrote in his goodbye note) “sharing want with us” (Olsen 1).** The narrator and Emily's father shared a brief and volatile relationship. Soon after Emily is born, he abandons her and her mother as he is unable to take care of the family financially and is not able to commit to his family duties, leaving his partner to care for Emily alone.

The narrator also does the housework herself. In the beginning of the story when the narrator is approached by someone unknown to us readers, who is perhaps a teacher or counsellor of some sort, who wants her to talk to her firstborn Emily about some trouble the young woman is in, the narrator says: **“I stand here ironing, and what you asked me moves tormented back and forth with the iron” (Olsen 1).** The heavy iron of those years symbolises the heaviness of the social constraints imposed on women, especially during the past, to shoulder the responsibility of housework, regardless whether or not they still work outside the home.

The words **“back and forth” (Olsen 1)** emphasise the repetitive nature of such tiring work, further illustrating how the narrator cannot escape housework. This is further expressed when she says she simply has no time to look into Emily's problem, saying: **“And when is there time to remember, to sift, to weigh, to estimate, to total? I will start and there will be an interruption and I will have to gather it all together again. Or I will become engulfed with all I did or did not do, with what should have been and what cannot be helped” (Olsen 1).** Time is therefore a privilege that the narrator does not have because she is busy making sure of her and her family's survival. Jafni and Bahar (250)

cited the work of the late American Betty Friedan, who in her seminal 1963 work 'The Feminine Mystique' articulated the phrase "the problem that has no name" (qtd. In Napikoski 2) referring to society's imposition on women to become perfect housewives and mothers above all else. In contrast, according to Friedan, men are not expected to shoulder domestic obligations like women are, and are free to participate in public life. Thus, the narrator's words about how she has to be there ironing illustrate the inequality between her and the men in her life who do not have to shoulder such domestic responsibility and parenthood if they do not want to. As a consequence, the narrator is sad and tired.

Sometime after being abandoned by Emily's father, the narrator enters into a new relationship with another man. This man in contrast to Emily's father is a bit more considerate and loving, and together they have a few children, including a daughter named Susan. The narrator describes this phase as such: **"She [Emily] had a new daddy now to learn to love, and I think perhaps it was a better time"** (Olsen 2). But ultimately the new man in their lives too has his weaknesses: he demands that the narrator leave Emily at night, in this line: **"Except when we left her alone nights, telling ourselves she was old enough"** (Olsen 2) and pledges the narrator's loyalty and devotion first towards him, rather than her children, thus creating a situation which produces maternal guilt in the narrator. After having a new baby, the narrator later abandons working outside, and devotes herself to working at home and being a full-time nanny to her children. Jafni and Bahar (252) opine that the relationship between the narrator and her husband is, at its very essence, a typical domestic arrangement – one which lacks intimacy and closeness.

However, it would be wrong or simplifying to say that the narrator is entirely a victim in this story. The narrator goes out to work, at least when her children were young, and assumes the typically what is considered as the "masculine role" of being the breadwinner. Furthermore, she does enjoy pockets of love and affection with her husband, and most of all, is utterly devoted to her children, especially with Emily whom she regards as her special one, as evidenced in this line: **"She was a beautiful baby. She blew shining bubbles of sound.**

She loved motion, loved light, loved color and music and textures. She would lie on the floor in her blue overalls patting the surface so hard in ecstasy her hands and feet would blur. She was a miracle to me [...]" (Olsen 1). Motherhood and domestic life in general can also be a liberating and powerful force, especially according to today's feminists who believe that women should have the choice to be whoever they want to be – to occupy the private life, the public life, or both (Simons 3). It would therefore be presumptuous to assume that the narrator in "I stand here ironing" as totally oppressed and lacking in agency.

Furthermore, the fact that the narrator gets to tell her story from her point of view is already an act of reclaiming power. Yuan and Dong (1650) state Olsen's story as such: "It was rare in literature history that a female or woman was the narrator or the protagonist, that is to say, Olsen tried to deconstruct the male authority and build the female discourse authority by the mother's narration." By saying "I stand here ironing" the narrator claims her sadness at her circumstances and limited station in life whilst also asserting her authority to own her story.

In conclusion, the narrator in this story describes her relationships with the fathers of her children as complicated: Emily's father abandons them, while the father of her subsequent children, while a bit more loving, creates pressure between her and her children. That said, she is not entirely a victim as she also finds love with him, as well with her children, revealing to us that feminism can be interpreted in a myriad myriad of ways and that ultimately choice prevails.

In analysing "I stand here ironing", us readers are exposed to readers the layered and paradoxical lives of women in literature, which in turn reflects society as a whole.

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