Palpable Silences
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The Great Depression of the 1930’s, which has been called the “invisible scar, the absent presence,” continues to impact American culture (Rabinowitz 17). The devastating effect of failed businesses, the dust bowl, farm foreclosures, and an unemployment rate of 30 percent reminds us that capitalism is fallible. Although we recall with humility this bleak period of our history, we seldom reflect on the plight of the Depression’s most vulnerable victims—the underpaid, uneducated working poor. In Yonnondio: From the Thirties, Tillie Olsen gives readers a searing personal account of a family struggling to escape, or at least manage, abject poverty. Their journey from a Wyoming mining town to a farm in South Dakota to a slaughterhouse in Omaha presents one disaster after another for the Holbrook family. Because of this cycle, they represent thousands of unsung heroes who struggled to survive and maintain a family unit during difficult times.

Although the novel depicts the family’s struggle as a unit, three members emerge as the main characters. Trapped by lack of opportunity and a faltering self-image, Jim Holbrook works under subhuman conditions to provide for his family. His struggle demonstrates how patriarchal culture oppresses both men and women into ascribed roles based on impossible ideals. Anna, his wife, holds the family together with the meager resources brought in by her husband, who devalues her role because she is a woman and earns no money. As a result of this oppression, she grapples with her own identity, as motherhood and domestic responsibility limit her opportunities for personal fulfillment and expression. In turn, Anna and Jim’s daughter, Mazie, emerges as the novel’s heroine as she determines to escape the hopelessness of her childhood and define her own reality.

Through these characters, Olsen creates a narrative that simultaneously dramatizes and propagandizes the experience of the poor working-class. The novel serves as an outcry against an economic system that dehumanizes both labor and laborers, forcing them into silences that alienate them from society and each other. As a result, Yonnondio explodes with “connections between class and gender, domestic work and wage work, production and reproduction” (Jameson 1). Olsen also challenges the American Dream as a false, oppressive illusion, and she explores patriarchal culture as a snare which victimizes both men and women. Although this novel speaks with profound melancholy and despair, it does not abandon hope as a significant survival mechanism.

In the opening section of the novel, the Holbrooks live in a Wyoming mining town where Jim works for a meager salary, “part money, mostly company scrip” (7). The financial hardships, together with the harsh surroundings, create an atmosphere of helplessness and hopelessness in the Holbrook household. Jim Holbrook must suffer the indignity of working in what Marie Kvaternik calls “the bowels of the earth” (2). Olsen describes this experience from the male point of view: “You lose that heritage of man, too. You are brought now to fit the earth’s intestines, stoop like a hunchback underneath, crawl like a child, do your man’s work lying on your side,
stretched and tense like a corpse” (5). The “heritage of man” of which the narrator speaks stems from a cultural belief in the American Dream, which socializes men to believe that having a good work ethic, regardless of the job, will provide a good life for their families. If they work hard enough, they can attain a better position than their fathers before them. Having a son to follow in his father’s footsteps is a rite of passage rooted in that work ethic. The narrator describes the experience of young Andy Kvaternik replacing his dead father as an ironic perversion of that ritual. Because of the tragedy involving his father, Andy must leave school at thirteen and work as a man does to support his family. At a time when other teenagers are thinking about their futures, Andy’s has already being decided. He will labor in the mine until either an accident kills him or the coal dust, “like a hand squeezing your throat,” produces a fatal respiratory disease (5). As a result, Andy, like Jim Holbrook and many others, becomes a slave to the capitalist machine that “eats the men that come down” into the mine, destroying them body and soul (4).

Emasculated and physically weakened by his daily experience “breath[ing] and breath[ing]” the coal dust, Jim faces the knowledge that he cannot control his fate (5). A series of whistles governs his day from morning till night. In an effort to regain some sense of control, Jim inundates his family with physical and verbal abuse. His “evil mood” affects the family so deeply that the “whole house walked in terror” (6). Yet before we can judge Jim, we must place his behavior in its proper historical and cultural context. In the 1930’s, men were expected to be the providers and protectors of the family. However, working in the mine pays just enough to provide the barest essentials for the Holbrook family, nothing more. According to Lois Tyson in her chapter “Feminist Criticisms,” “failure to provide adequate economic support for one’s family is considered the most humiliating failure a man can experience” (86).

In order to avoid the feelings of humiliation, Jim deals the children “heavy blows” and “struck Anna too often to remember” (6). Rather than admit that he shares her deepest concerns about his safety and the family’s future, he dismisses her with taunts like “Quit your woman’s babblin’” (2). Jim has been socialized by the culture to believe that pain and fear are feminine emotions, which, in his mind, associate them with weakness. In her book, Protest and Possibility in the Writing of Tillie Olsen, Mara Faulkner argues, “patriarchal attitudes and not just poverty lead proletarian men to dominate their wives” (72). The culture, dominated by patriarchal values and poverty, prevents Jim from fulfilling the role of husband and father as he imagines it.

Although Olsen structures the first section of the novel as an elegy for the poor working underclass, the narrative belongs primarily to Mazie. As the oldest daughter of Jim and Anna, Mazie observes and absorbs her surroundings, recording impressions about what it means to be both poor and a woman. Since we normally consider a child between the ages of 6 and 9 little more than a baby, it seems strange to us that so much responsibility falls on such a young child. However, poverty and lack of education force Mazie to share in domestic chores such as cleaning, cooking, and child rearing. Because she is the eldest female child, Mazie’s “developing subjectivity will grow out of relations of dominance structured within her family rather than those on the factory” (Rabinowitz 126). In other words, Jim releases his frustration onto Anna, who, in turn, releases hers onto the children. Yet out of all the children, Mazie receives most of it because she occupies the position closest to the mother. Anna screams at Mazie to “Shut baby up...I don’t care how” (17). As a result, Anna worries that “Mazie, for all her six and a half years, was like a woman sometimes. It’s living like this does it...makes ‘em old before their time” (2). More importantly, while poverty forces Mazie into the oppression of womanhood, as a child, she lacks both the language to express her rage and a place to deposit it.

Being an old, young woman, Mazie becomes aware of the harsh realities of her life before she has any power to change them. One of those harsh realities imposes on her as she takes a walk to town with her father. Mazie wants to know “does the boss man have a white shiny tub bigger than you and he turns something and water comes out?” (9). Jim’s response makes her aware that the poverty that engulfs her family does not affect those for whom her father works; they lead a different kind of life. Although Mazie does not
completely understand what it means to have “edjication,” she begins to make the connection that, as her mother says, “it means your hands stay white and you read books and work in an office” (3). This realization marks the beginning of a quest that follows her throughout the novel.

In addition to the economic subjectivity Mazie encounters, she learns in the mining town that as a woman, she is sexually vulnerable, unable to protect her own body from a raging man. In a state of delirium, Sheen McEvoy, a deranged miner, attempts to avenge the deaths of miners by offering Mazie, “a little child, pure of heart” to the mine (11). As her senses take in “the red mass of jelly that was his face” “his body...hot and putrid. Stinking,” Mazie forms a permanent association of sex with abuse of power. As she moves closer to adolescence in the novel, “the dangers become more overt. The sexed body of the working-class girl more thoroughly positions her in a (sexual) economy than does her laboring body” (Rabinowitz 127). In other words, Mazie learns through experiences, and by watching her mother, that her value both to society and to her family lies in unpaid domestic labor and reproduction. Through Mazie’s deceptively simple narrative, Olsen demonstrates how class and gender equally subjugate women.

As the novel progresses into the second section, the Holbrook family leaves the mining town to try farming in South Dakota. This section represents a period of renewed hope for this family, especially for Mazie. Even the landscape of the farm signals hope and possibility, as the narrator describes how “the laughter of summer was on the earth” (31). Mazie embarks on a process of self-discovery that results from a mentoring relationship with Mr. Caldwell and a deeper understanding of her mother’s life and desire for her children to be educated.

In Mr. Caldwell, Mazie discovers a wealth of knowledge, which reawakens the desire for education that first ignited in the mining town. He encourages Mazie to “build on the knowing with the wondering” (37). However, as Mazie becomes “acutely conscious of her scuffed shoes, rag-bag clothes, [and] quilt coat,” she also becomes aware that she and Will are already far behind the other children in their academic development (35). Although they quickly grasp the ability to read, the school eventually closes, and Jim sells the books that Mr. Caldwell bequeaths Mazie. These events signal the end of Mazie’s formal education, which for Anna, Mr. Caldwell, and Mazie, means that her opportunities to escape the domestic trap will be fewer.

On the farm, Mazie again must play surrogate mother, but this time to a greater extent because Anna’s latest pregnancy causes her to slip into a haze and neglect her housework. The narrative in this section of the novel places Mazie strategically between her mother and father, so that the reader understands how Mazie identifies more closely with her mother than her father, although she enjoys moments of warmth with him. As Mazie watches her mother grow “monstrous fat” (40), she assumes what her father calls “a woman’s ***damned* life,” which consists of feeding the smaller children and entertaining them with “things cut out of a catalog” (41). Jim’s frustration with the now failing farm and his wife’s inactivity results in further violence and accusations against Anna.

Again, patriarchal culture rears its ugly head in the Holbrook household. Mazie hears her father scream at Anna, “No wonder nothing ever comes right. Lots of help I get from my woman” (41). However, since Mazie has taken on the household chores, she comprehends Anna, who responds, “You get plenty help. Kitchen help, farm help, milkin help, washerwoman help. And mothering too” (41). As Elaine Orr asserts in her article “On the Side of the Mother, “Olsen writes near the mother. She hears and requires the reader to hear from the daughter’s close positioning; thus, readers are ‘touched’ by the sounds of the mother’s pain mediated by the daughter’s thinking” (5). Although Mazie is still a young girl, she develops a strong sense of motherhood as a circumstance that can “simultaneously hinder and nourish genius” (Gottlieb 1).

Mazie has witnessed her mother’s swing of emotions from jubilant to deeply depressed, through songs when she is happy, and silence when she is sad. The reader experiences Anna’s childbirth, not through her own interpretations, but through Mazie. Jim leaves Mazie behind to help her mother prepare the bed for the delivery. In a more romantic tale, this scene would be depicted as some absurd rite of passage from mother to
daughter. However, Mazie's observation of the experience evokes not awe, but physical and emotional revulsion. Somehow the environment and her mother's pregnant body merge in her mind into one oppressive image. Outside the house, the sky becomes "bellies, swollen bellies, black and corpse gray, puffing out baggier and baggier...her mother. Night, sweating bodies. The blood and pain of birth" (43). Because of this, Mazie places womanhood and motherhood into the same mixture of pain and powerlessness she felt when Sheen McEvoy attacked her at the mine, remembering "the night bristling, the blood and the drunken breath and the blob of spit, something soft, mushy, pressed against her face" (77). As if to validate this perception, Anna warns her daughter later in the novel, "Mazie you fix yourself so you don't have no kids. Don't ever let no man touch you, see, unless you're fixed" (147).

For Mazie the distortion of one's body, the pain and blood associated with bringing forth life, does not draw her closer to Anna, but instead alienates them both. Mazie watches as Anna's visage becomes "a look of not seeing," a look that isolates the mother from the daughter who desperately needs her own anxieties calmed as she cries "Momma" (43). The childbirth experience forces both mother and daughter into silence because it represents "the continued reproduction of working-class womanhood, a cycle of mothering, housework, wage work, and sexual vulnerability that distinguished working-class men and women, girls and boys" (Jameson 2). Simply put, a new baby means more work for both Mazie and Anna, and another mouth that Jim must work hard to feed.

After a year of "workin' like a team of mules," Jim fails at farming (39). He feels he has no other choice but to relocate the family to Omaha, where he will find work at a slaughterhouse. At this point in the novel, the narrative shifts to the perspective of the mother. Although this section presents the most overt political stance on behalf of the proletariat, we learn more about Anna's personal struggles as a woman: her hopes, dreams and fears for her children, and the devastating effects that repeated pregnancies, poor diet, and inadequate housing have had on her body. Nevertheless, Anna holds on to a glimmer of hope for her children despite the bleak surroundings and sense of failure she feels.

As a mother, Anna exemplifies great courage and humanity as she experiences what can be described only as a complete breakdown, physical and mental. Yet she never completely relinquishes her role as wife and mother. As the narrator relates: "Remote she fed and clothed the children, scrubbed, gave herself to Jim, clenching her fists against a pain she had no strength to feel" (56). Anna’s illness "serves to deaden her senses, and the result is an increased awareness not of herself and her needs but of her failures as a poverty stricken mother" (Macpherson 3). Exacerbating those feelings of failure, Jim, projecting his own helplessness as a husband and father, devalues her work and blames her for his inability to succeed financially.

By this time Jim realizes that the American Dream to which he has been clinging is a cruel fallacy. Although "freedom of opportunity and a "chanceritise" are worthy ideals, they do not guarantee success in a flawed capitalistic system (62). Jim reaches the sad conclusion that "a job was God, and praying wasn't enough, you had to live for it, produce for it, prostrate for it, take anything from it" (62). By moving back and forth from Jim's experience at work to his behavior at home, Olsen demonstrates how both poverty and patriarchal culture oppress the women in Jim's life. As a subjugated worker, Jim re-enacts his own powerlessness on his family, especially his wife. The cycle of domination moves from the job to Jim, from Jim to Anna, and often, from Anna to the children. Paula Rabinowitz describes the process this way: "The organization of the family—at once hierarchal and communal—differs from yet mirrors the rigid economic stratification of the social spaces across which the Holbrooks travel" (125). Jim feels intense emotional pain over his plight, but because "being a real man in patriarchal culture requires that one hold feminine qualities in contempt," he finds no words to express his hurt (Tyson 87). He waits for the day when "hands will find a way to speak this: hands" (79). As a product of patriarchal culture, Jim associates manhood with labor; what a man accomplishes with his hands becomes his voice in the world. Therefore, the absence of adequate work leaves a man voiceless.

In this section of the novel, Anna speaks more
through her silence than her actual words. After the miscarriage, she drifts in and out of a fever-induced delirium. One day, in desperation Anna cries, “the children. What’s going to happen to them?” (90). Anna’s poignant question resonates with broad implications for society as a whole. The Depression era begins after a period of hope and prosperity experienced in the 1920’s and before the 1940s, which brought social reform in the New Deal. What could a poor, working-class family expect in terms of assistance if one of the pillars holding up the family were to collapse? Without heralding her own cause, Anna demonstrates her value to her husband and children. Even though in a weakened state, Anna takes in laundry to earn a few extra dollars for the family. As a woman, she exemplifies the courage that many women showed during the Depression as they defied their physical, social, and economic limitations for the survival of their families.

Crucial to that survival for Anna is the ability to maintain hope and a sense of self, despite the poverty and constrictions of the home. The scene that best demonstrates this finds Anna and her children on an afternoon stroll beyond their squalid neighborhood. Always perceptive, Mazie becomes aware of a “strangeness rising in her mother, not like the sickness strange, something else” (97). For the first time in the novel, Anna reflects on the happier days of her childhood. Mazie watches in awe as “a remote shining look was on her face, as if she had forgotten them, as if she had become someone else, not their mother any more” (100). Anna had not actually forgotten her children. She had, however, remembered herself. Not sure how to interpret her mother’s strangeness, Mazie asks, “Don’t we have enough yet?” (100). But Anna physically engulfs her, strokes her; she sings softly to her. In this scene, as Caldwell predicts before his death, Anna passes a legacy of resistance on to her daughter. By sharing the essence of her self, the “womanness” that yet exists within her body and soul, Anna transcends the struggle to survive. Between the song and the caresses “the fingers stroked, spun a web, cocooned Mazie into happiness and intactness and selfness” (102).

This burgeoning sense of self will serve Mazie well as the novel draws to an uncertain conclusion. The three added conclusions to the novel suggest that more heartache will come. The only hope the reader can take away from the bleak epilogues is that Mazie will gather enough strength and determination to overcome the obstacles of her gender and socio-economic position. Perhaps the specific details of the ending are not important to what we gain from this novel. In *Yonnondio*, Olsen gives us a glimpse of class warfare and the collapse of the American Dream from woman’s perspective. As a “mother-worker-writer” of the Depression era, Olsen understands both the frustration of the underpaid, working underclass, and the complicated mixture of joy and confinement that mothers face. She brilliantly writes the characters in this novel so that those of us who will not experience utter poverty and lack of opportunity will feel how desperate the silences were for those who did.

**Works Cited**


