2003

Re-presentations of motherhood in the writings of Tillie Olsen and Sylvia Plath

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Re-presentations of motherhood in the writings of Tillie Olsen and Sylvia Plath

by

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A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Major: English (Literature)

Program of Study Committee:
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Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa
2003

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This is to certify that the master's thesis of

Mary Sydney Stromme

has met the thesis requirements of Iowa State University

Signatures have been redacted for privacy
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction 1
Defining motherhood 2
Who are mothers? 4
Mothers who are also artists 5

Chapter One: Tillie Olsen 8
Yonnondio: One mother’s story 11
Re-presenting motherhood 12
“I Stand Here Ironing”: What is expected of motherhood 18

Chapter Two: Sylvia Plath 22
Reflections and repudiations in “Candles” 23
A deeper understanding 26
The influence of motherhood 29
The conflict between motherhood and self 31
The conflict re-presented in poetry 33

Chapter Three: Comparisons 36
A comparison of time and circumstance 36
A comparison of style 39
Other voices 43

Chapter Four: Conclusion 45

Appendix 47
“Candles” 47

References Cited 48
Introduction

“She had all her life long been accustomed to harbor thoughts and emotions which never voiced themselves. They had never taken the form of struggles. They belonged to her and were her own, and she entertained the conviction that she had a right to them and that they concerned no one but herself.”

- Kate Chopin, The Awakening (1899)

The experience of motherhood has, for centuries, been mythologized and misrepresented in western literature, resulting either in exalting or denigrating the status of mothers, ultimately distorting the expectations, capabilities, and realities of motherhood. As a woman, a mother, and a scholar, I have been affected in profound and primarily negative ways by this literary misrepresentation and its extensive ramifications. Although great strides have recently been made in academia with the inclusion in the literary canon of works in which motherhood is accurately represented, the number of these works is minuscule in comparison to other representations included from past literary canons. It is because of the disproportion of misrepresentational literary works still being widely read and taught in academia today that I feel the necessity to write on this subject — to add another voice to those who are struggling to change these misconceptions and the subsequent internal and external discord they have created in the lives of both women and men.

An important part of my analysis is focused on clarifying differences between traditional literary representations of motherhood and what I see as more accurate literary presentations of motherhood. I will provide clarification by locating, defining,
and emphasizing the significance of difference between traditional representations and the new re-presentations of motherhood in specific areas of texts. Therefore, throughout this analysis it is important to understand that when I refer to examples in texts as representation(s) I am referring to the common or traditional literary representations. When I use the term re-presentation(s) I am referring to the nontraditional or different approach(es) exemplified in a literary presentation.

Defining motherhood

It is impossible to assert one "true" definition of the word motherhood, a word that encompasses a wide and varied assortment of emotional responses and physical acts which are further diversified by unique experiences among individuals of different races, cultures, and ethnicities, and additionally by one's economic and social status. For a point of origin, however, I would like to provide the Oxford English Dictionary's definition of motherhood. In its necessity for concise denotations, it states that motherhood is "1 Motherly feeling or love", "2 The condition or fact of being a mother" and/or "3 ANTHROPOLOGY. A clan constituted by kinship through the mother" (1: 1840). In reality, however, motherhood is not easily confined to such simplistic designations. For example, there are mothers who do not have motherly feelings or love their children, and even mothers who do have motherly feelings may not feel love toward their children all the time. It is not my intention, by providing these cursory definitions, to oversimplify the term or minimize the diversity that exists among the numerous people who provide physical and emotional sustenance for children and their respective thoughts on motherhood. As Patricia Hill Collins explains in her essay, "Shifting the Center: Race, Class, and
Feminist Theorizing About Motherhood" (1994), there are significant differences between mothering as a white woman versus mothering as a woman of color in America. She reveals how white, middle-class feminists have consistently neglected to acknowledge the existence of these differences but also suggests that theorizing about motherhood will not be helped [...] by supplanting one group's theory with that of another -- for example, by claiming that women of color's experiences are more valid than those of white, middle-class women. Just as varying placement in systems of privilege, whether race, class, sexuality, or age, generates divergent experiences with motherhood, examining motherhood and mother-as-subject from multiple perspectives should uncover rich textures of difference. Shifting the center to accommodate this diversity promises to recontextualize motherhood and point us toward feminist theorizing that embraces difference as an essential part of commonality (Representations of Motherhood, Bassin et al. 72-73).

Although my thesis focuses on the writings of two white women, my intention is to embrace the different and oftentimes contradictory emotions experienced by many mothers and, more specifically, by mothers who are also artists. By doing this, I would like to affirm "difference as an essential part of commonality" in motherhood, particularly as it is exhibited in a capitalistic society where the role of mothers and the acts of motherhood are taken for granted, undervalued, and undermined by a dominant majority. The perpetuation of the myth that difference is bad and consistency is good denies and silences the reality of conflicting yet coinciding emotions experienced in motherhood -- love and hate, anger and remorse,
selflessness and selfishness, and also the paradox of being in a position of authority while feeling powerless.

With the knowledge that motherhood is not capable of being assigned one, two, or even three specific definitions, it is necessary to further expand on the *Oxford English Dictionary*’s concise denotation by suggesting that motherhood is defined, at least in part, by maternal acts. Through a combination of personal experience, research, and observation, philosopher Sara Ruddick provides a definition for maternal work in *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace* (1989). She asserts that “three demands – for preservation, growth, and social acceptability – constitute maternal work; to be a mother is to be committed to meeting these demands by works of preservative love, nurturance, and training” (17). Although women are not the only ones who provide a stable, safe, and nurturing environment in which children may learn and grow to adulthood, this role is and has been assumed primarily by women.

**Who are mothers?**

Those who experience motherhood, throughout history and across cultural and racial borders, are a numerous and diverse group. In her book *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1976), Adrienne Rich explains that [m]ost of us were raised by our mothers, or by women who for love, necessity, or money took the place of our biological mothers. Throughout history women have helped birth and nurture each other’s children. Most women have been mothers in the sense of tenders and carers for the young, whether as sisters, aunts, nurses, teachers, foster-mothers, stepmothers. Tribal life, the village,
the extended family, the female networks of some cultures, have included the very young, very old, unmarried, and infertile women in the process of ‘mothering.’ (12)

This historical overview presents motherhood as it was in the past — more of a community effort than the solitary experience it became for many in twentieth century America. This isolation is facilitated by continuous physical relocations, whether for work-related or personal reasons, and it is also facilitated by our increasing dependence on technology — in educational and working environments as well as at home. It is this isolated and largely invisible private existence of experiencing motherhood that is rarely included in literary canons. A significant portion of my analysis will focus on exploring the internal dialogue — the guilt, turmoil, and questioning of a mother — as it exists in literature written by women who are also mothers.

Mothers who are also artists

In Portrait of the Mother-Artist: Class and Creativity in Contemporary American Fiction (2003), Andrea O'Reilly emphasizes that there are correlations between motherhood and writing. She asserts that “writing, much like mothering, is based on relationality, reciprocity, and mutuality” (x), but that “sexist ideologies and practices have kept mothers from writing” (xi). With the knowledge that writing and motherhood are not mutually exclusive entities, there is still a question of time. When does a mother, especially a mother who has to work outside the home to help support her family, find the time and energy to write? And if she does, how does she reconcile the conflicting priorities of children needing her attention with her own need
to express herself and her experiences in writing? These are some of the questions that I will explore in specific writings of Tillie Olsen and Sylvia Plath.

Chapter One will focus on writings by Olsen. Her unfinished novel *Yonnondio* will be analyzed because it is Olsen's first attempt to re-present motherhood in book length form. The incompleteness of this novel may also be seen as symbolic in the sense that it symbolizes the incompleteness or ongoing experiences of motherhood. Even when children are gone, motherhood is not finished. It simply evolves into yet another phase/stage. Olsen's short story "I Stand Here Ironing," first published in 1956, is significant because it exemplifies a monumental step in literature by illuminating the thoughts of a mother and by providing a mother's perspective of motherhood. It reveals the psychological isolation of a mother as well as her capability of thoughtful and honest introspection, her guilt and the futility of that guilt, and her perseverance. In her book *Silences* (1978), Olsen explains her perspective on how and why the written expression of some mothers is silenced, whether by a conscious decision of their own or because of circumstances and oppressions beyond their control.

The publication of Sylvia Plath's myth-shattering poetry in *Ariel* (1965) closely follows Olsen's earlier literary achievements. In Chapter Two I will focus on "Candles," a poem that was written in 1960, and included in *Crossing the Water: Transitional Poems* (1971). It is also my intent to emphasize the predominance of motherhood in Plath's later poetry, a concept that is largely ignored in most critical studies of Plath's writing. In his brief preface to *Three Women* (1968), Douglas Cleverdon is one among few who thoughtfully reveals, "[c]onsidering the vast range
of poems on death and mortality, it is surprising that such a fundamental experience as birth has so little literature of its own – until, of course, one remembers how few great poets have themselves been mothers” (6). This is a significant statement, and it is one that I intend to expand on by asserting that we need to revise our analysis of Plath’s later poetry by acknowledging her unique experiences as a mother and by opening our minds to see how these experiences are significantly re-presented in her poetry.

In Chapter Three I will compare and contrast the writings of Olsen and Plath, revealing similarities in their creations and portrayals of honest, authentic maternal voices, while also including pertinent information concerning their personal lives and, in doing so, locating some of the spaces/circumstances from which they were writing. In “Notes toward a Politics of Location” (1984), Rich writes, “If we have learned anything in these years of late twentieth-century feminism, it’s that that ‘always’ blots out what we really need to know: When, where, and under what conditions has this been true?” (Blood, Bread, and Poetry, 214). Rich’s observation and advice will provide one of the necessary lenses for this twenty-first century analysis. My focus throughout is centered in American literature written between 1932 and 1963, and is narrowed further to the writings, experiences, and locations of Olsen and Plath.
Chapter One: Tillie Olsen

As mentioned earlier, many fictional representations of motherhood in western literature have served to perpetuate the myth of mother as either good or bad, angel or demon. Consequently, motherhood is largely misconstrued as either self-sacrificing (good mother) or neglectful and selfish (bad mother). Unrealistic expectations of mothers and motherhood are the predominant result: expectations from western society on how mothers should act, think, and/or feel. Even more unfortunate are the unrealistic expectations with which many women view mothers, our own and others', and how many of us approach and experience motherhood for ourselves.

One major factor in the predominance of motherhood myths in literature is the lack of mothers writing. Tillie Olsen points out in her book Silences (1978) that, historically, mothers rarely had the time, energy, or necessary resources that would have enabled them to write. Consequently, little fiction has been written or published by mothers on motherhood - literature that provides a mother's perspective on motherhood - until the mid-twentieth century. In the rare instances when mothers did write, it was to support their family. They wrote fiction that would appeal to a large audience and therefore did not have the economic freedom/luxury to write overt resistance literature. The few mothers who wrote fiction did not reveal harsh truths or contradictory feelings experienced in motherhood because they were compelled (and many times were merely allowed) to write because of economic necessity, and quite possibly because they, too, bought into and helped perpetuate the motherhood myths.
In her essay "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision" (1972) Adrienne Rich writes of strictures women placed on themselves and their writing because they knew they were writing for a male audience. She refers to women such as Virginia Woolf who noticeably restrains her anger throughout "A Room of One's Own" (1929). Woolf's anger in this essay is subdued and repressed, but is nevertheless apparent to women writers who know what it is like to want or need to write successfully in a patriarchal and capitalistic society. As Rich points out, women were encouraged, as late as the twentieth century, to write like a man, even in their fiction (20).

Admittedly, women have made substantial strides in the literary, academic, and economic fields during the past seven decades, but the institution of motherhood that Rich defines in her book Of Woman Born (1976), and the unrealistic expectations of motherhood that the institution perpetuates, are painfully slow in deteriorating. Two authors who have aided in breaking down this institution through their bold writing are Tillie Olsen and Sylvia Plath. Both of these women are mothers as well as successful authors. Also, both write of the experience of motherhood from a mother's point of view (mother as subject instead of mother as object), not only including, but highlighting physical and emotional paradoxes contained in the experience. Although Olsen is noted for the maternal characters in her stories, Plath is not as well-known for the substantial amount of poetry in which she focuses on experiences related to motherhood. Despite their different genres, both authors provide a more comprehensive picture of motherhood with striking and concise precision.
Tillie Olsen’s Yonnondio and “I Stand Here Ironing” include re-presentations of motherhood in the early twentieth-century. Stripped of all luxuries and possible choices by economic insecurity, the mothers in these stories are in desperate circumstances. The stories contain inner dialogues full of turmoil, anger, and despair, providing insight to some common experiences of women among the working class who are engaged in motherhood. In Of Woman Born (1976), Adrienne Rich writes:

the mothers, if we could look into their fantasies – their daydreams and imaginary experiences – we would see the embodiment of rage, of tragedy, of the overcharged energy of love, of inventive desperation, we would see the machinery of institutional violence wrenching at the experience of motherhood. (280)

Institutional violence, as Rich describes it, is caused by unrealistic expectations of what mothers should be able to do. For example, mothers are expected to remain in a perpetual state of self-denial during the years that they are taking care of their children. They are expected to be patient and loving with their children in all situations, kind and thoughtful in every disciplinary action, and always alert to the physical, intellectual, and emotional needs of their children. The reality, however, is that mothers are merely human beings with individual thoughts, feelings, desires, and limitations of their own.

In her stories Olsen provides readers with this human side of mothers, a side rarely portrayed in literature, particularly in 1934 when a portion of Yonnondio was first published and rare still in 1956 when “I Stand Here Ironing” was published for
the first time. When one thinks of mothers in America in the mid-twentieth century, visions of the “ideal” mother in Leave It to Beaver or The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet frequently come to mind. Olsen had experienced the reality of motherhood long before this, however.

**Yonnondio: One mother’s story**

Although it wasn’t published in novel form until 1974, Tillie Olsen began writing Yonnondio in 1932 at the age of 19, at the same time that she became pregnant with Karla, the first of her four daughters (Coiner 145). This unfinished novel is about the struggles of an impoverished American family in the early part of the twentieth century. The story of the Holbrook family’s plight in Yonnondio is presented primarily by an omniscient narrator, a technique which allows readers to move in and out of Anna Holbrook’s reality to see how she views and reacts to her circumstances, her children, and her role as a mother.

Olsen doesn’t begin Yonnondio with Anna’s perspective, though. The story begins with a common literary perspective of a mother: a child’s. The eldest child, Mazie, hears “[h]er mother’s tired, grimy voice” (1) asking what her father, Jim, wants for breakfast. Perhaps one reason why this perspective of a mother is so prevalent in literature is because we all have mothers and therefore this view is one with which a majority of readers are able to identify. This perspective is followed by another common frame of reference: a man’s. When Anna explains to Jim how a

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1 According to Constance Coiner, in her book Better Red: The Writing and Resistance of Tillie Olsen and Meridel Le Sueur (1995), a portion of Yonnondio was published in the April-May 1934 issue of Partisan Review (145) and according to the introductory information in Tell Me a Riddle (1961), “I Stand Here Ironing” was first published in the Pacific Spectator.
friend of theirs doesn’t want her daughters to have to worry about money or having kids when they grow up Jim responds with, “Well, what other earthly use can a woman have, I’d like to know” (2). Olsen’s strategy of subtly opening her story with a seemingly benign child’s point of view, followed closely by a widely held patriarchal view is effective in appealing to a large audience. These are perspectives that many readers are familiar with, and therefore may be referred to as “reader-friendly.” Once Olsen has established credibility with her audience in this way, by affirming a reality that they trust, she leads them into an area that is considerably less familiar.

Re-presenting motherhood

Anna appears at the outset in the reader-friendly mother position of cooking breakfast. This comfortable representation quickly shifts, however, to a re-presentation when we see her later as she is “lay[ing] in the posture of sleep” and we find out that “[t]houghts, like worms, crept within her” (3). To many readers this may, at best, be an unusual way to describe a mother’s thoughts. To others it may be interpreted as decidedly unmotherly. When we think of mothers and thoughts that they may be having, we may think of cooking or cleaning or taking care of the children, but we usually don’t think of mothers as having “thoughts like worms” creeping within them. By choosing these words to describe Anna’s external and internal position, Olsen is letting the reader know that first, even though Anna may appear as if she is sleeping restfully, appearances may be deceiving. Secondly, Olsen is letting the reader know that the thoughts going through this mother’s mind are hardly frivolous or naive. Readers are invited not only to listen in, but also to understand and empathize with Anna’s thoughts. These thoughts include the reality
that she may have to raise four children alone if Jim is killed in the mines. She also worries about her children and how “living like this [...] makes ‘em old before their time” (3). Olsen’s writing encourages the reader to feel the anxiety and the helplessness that Anna feels.

Although there is frequently despair in Anna’s thoughts, Olsen periodically alternates the feeling of hopelessness in this character with a persistent hope for a better future. When Mazie asks her mother what it means to get an education, Anna tells her that “An edjication is what you kids are going to get. It means your hands stay white and you read books and work in an office” (4). Although we are allowed to experience, along with Anna, an enduring hope for a better future for her children, Olsen never allows us to venture very far from Anna’s current reality. While Anna is explaining the importance of an education to Mazie she is washing clothes “amidst the shifting vapors of the washtub and with the suds dripping over her red hands” (4). We don’t know the extent, if any, of Anna’s education, but because of her limited vocabulary and her overly optimistic view that obtaining an education will mean the end of poverty, the reader is led to believe that she did not have any extensive education.

The hardships the family faces throughout their various attempts at gaining an economic foothold take an emotional toll on Anna. This allows us to see the unique perspective of how institutional violence wrenches at the experience of motherhood in Anna’s world. Without the benefit of having the most rudimentary necessities with which to raise a family, necessities such as having a decent house to live in, having enough food to eat, and having adequate clothing to wear, a different dimension in
the experience of motherhood is illustrated. Mothers are expected to nurture and care for their children emotionally, intellectually, and physically, but it is difficult to provide their children with even an adequate amount of attention, which requires time and energy, when both time and energy are spent taking care of their children's most basic physical needs.

Mothers in these circumstances have little time to think of themselves or the luxury of contemplating what they want out of life. Their choices are limited with the birth of the first child, and the amount of spare time to think is reduced with the birth of each successive child. By the time Anna becomes pregnant with her fifth child we understand that she is neither a good mother nor a bad mother. She is a woman who is trying her best to take care of the children that she has. Anna, like Jim, beats their children (9), but by this point in the story the reader understands why. Jim beats Anna, too, and it is because of their stressful circumstances and their limited amount of energy that neither one of them is able to offer a more kind and thoughtful reaction. There is only enough thought and energy for striking out at whatever is causing the most immediate distress: a child’s untimely cry, a neglected duty, an unasked for response, or an unexpected question. When Jim becomes angry with Anna because of her catatonic state during her pregnancy he shouts, "A woman's goddam life [...] sittin around huggin a stove" (56). Olsen has provided us with more of Anna's perspective than Jim's in Yonnondio and therefore we are able to empathize with her tired body and depressed psychological state much more than we do with Jim's condemnation of her. Readers are led by Olsen to understand the inaccuracy and injustice of his outburst.
Olsen does not allow the reader any extended emotional reprieve in her re-presentation of motherhood in this story. As much as we may hope that Anna’s circumstances and responsibilities as a mother will become easier, they do not. After she gives birth to Bess and the family moves to Denver, Anna’s physical health declines rapidly. Readers come to understand the toll that the responsibilities of motherhood can have, first on the mind, and then on the body, when we read that “[i]nto her great physical pain and weariness Anna stumbled and lost herself. Remote, she fed and clothed the children, scrubbed, gave herself to Jim, clenching her fists against a pain she had no strength to feel” (80). When she finally loses consciousness and is diagnosed as having had a miscarriage it takes four people to perform Anna’s duties, and even then the children and house are not taken care of as efficiently or effectively as Anna did when she was well. The reader also realizes that, unlike other full-time employment, there is no cessation in the duties and responsibilities of motherhood. It is only because Anna is bedridden and largely unconscious that she gets a brief respite from being a mother.

It is interesting to note that, like the character of Anna in this story, Olsen did not have time for herself or her writing until she became seriously ill with tuberculosis in 1932. Unlike most people experiencing a debilitating illness however, Olsen saw her illness as a blessing. In Better Red: The Writing and Resistance of Tillie Olsen and Meridel Le Sueur (1995) Constance Coiner writes that “[a]s a result of it [Olsen] was bedridden, and since she could not be politically active and was ‘in every way taken care of,’ something women of her class rarely experience, she was free to write” (145). This is one example of how Olsen’s life experiences are interwoven into her
writing. She understood the time constraints experienced by the working-class and it was partly because of her temporary freedom from physical labor that Olsen was able to begin writing *Yonnondio*.

During Anna's period of recuperation she also has, finally, enough time to pause and reflect about herself and her life. She thinks about what she has become and about what she once dreamed her life would be. Again, Olsen juxtaposes thoughts of a better reality with the reality that is currently being experienced by this character in *Yonnondio*:

> Oh when she was a girl...The life she had dreamed and the life that had come to be...The scabby sore on Ben's finger scratched against her arm, and the vagrant wind retched the garbage smell. She closed her eyes again, but this time when she opened them, her fists were clenched, and Ben she had held so close to her was pushed away. (123)

The reader can sense, by the end of this excerpt, that Anna is angry. She is angry at the injustice of her circumstances and angry because she is helpless to change them. She is also angry because what she expected from life is very different than what her life has become. We realize that she is not angry with her son Ben so much as she is angry with what he represents. For Anna, Ben represents her current reality and his sore symbolizes the endless list of illnesses that she must help her children recover from. Ben's sore reminds her of all her childrens' needs and wants, and how she must somehow satisfy them, regardless of whether she feels like it or not.
Even though Anna knows that she must continue on with her current reality, at this point in time she does not want to. After she pushes Ben away we find out that "[w]hether or not she said it aloud, a cry throbbed in the air: No. No" (123). From a child's perspective the act of pushing Ben away might be viewed as one that is without provocation and therefore cruel. From a man's perspective Anna's act of pushing Ben away may be viewed as unjust or unfair. Readers get the mother's perspective, though. Since the reader has been experiencing motherhood largely through the mother's perspective, we realize that Anna has reached the limit of her mental and physical capabilities. Anna is re-presented here as a mother, but also as a person with needs and desires of her own, a person who once had dreams of her own future long before she had dreams for her children's future. The hopes she now has for her children supplanted the dreams she once had for herself and, for the first time, she is angry because somehow, somewhere amidst the daily struggle to help her family to survive, she lost herself.

For a short time after this episode Anna tries to retrieve her lost self, the self she was before she became a mother, but once again the needs and desires of her children prevail. One of the most intriguing scenes in the novel is when Anna takes her children out to gather dandelion greens. For a time Anna becomes lost in her past self, revealing to her children thoughts and events that she experienced as a child. First Ben and then Mazie become increasingly uncomfortable with this unfamiliar happy and carefree person who is so different from the mother that they're used to. The children quickly work to bring her back to the responsible mother that they know and, as Mazie observes later, "[n]ever again, but once, did Mazie see that
look – the other look – on her mother’s face” (147). In Anna’s world, at least, motherhood and selfhood can not be integrated to any great degree without disrupting her children’s sense of security, a security that is based largely on their ideas of what a mother should be, including how she should think and feel, and how she should respond to them.

“I Stand Here Ironing”: What is expected of motherhood

A mother’s children are not the only ones who have high expectations of motherhood and what a mother should be aware of and capable of accomplishing in the lives of her children. From beginning to end, Olsen’s short story “I Stand Here Ironing” is a strong and unflinching indictment of society’s expectations of motherhood.

Olsen immediately and continually lets us know, through the simultaneous ambiguity and all-encompassing nature of the pronouns she uses in this story, that there is a great deal of suffering and self-recrimination caused by institutional violence. In the first line we are told that “you” are the one who has provoked this mother’s thoughts. Most assume that “you” in the mother’s thoughts about “what you asked me” (1) is probably a reference to a counselor or teacher at the school that the mother’s daughter is attending, but because you is never given a name in the story, you may also be interpreted as Olsen’s indirect targeting of us, the readers of this story.

The mother in this story, a nameless “me,” attempts to explain what it is “you do not guess” and what “you do not know” (2). Although we are, in a sense, targeted as “you” in the story, a majority of readers quickly shift and become positioned with
“me,” the mother, shortly after the first paragraph. A majority are therefore able to experience Olsen's literary re-presentation of motherhood, a presentation that is far different from previous fictional representations.

Also included in the re-presentation of this mother’s memories is the repetition of the pronoun “they.” The reader is led to assume that they are/were society’s current experts in the field of childrearing. For example, the mother explains how she nursed her daughter because “They feel that’s important nowadays” (2; italics mine). Because of the reference to the present in this statement, the reader may infer that what the experts on childrearing proclaim to be important is continually changing. This would be particularly evident to an audience in 1956, many of whom were being told that, at this period in time, bottle-feeding was the preferred method of feeding a child.

Another example of how they is used to locate and incriminate others not directly involved in the role of motherhood is found when the mother sends two-year-old Emily to nursery school because they said she was old enough (3). In many cases a young mother, unsure of what is best for her child, relies heavily on what society and its experts in the field of childrearing deem suitable or appropriate actions and activities for the various stages of childhood. This message is conveyed through the text when Emily becomes ill and they persuade this mother to send her daughter to a convalescent home where “‘she can have the kind of food and care [the mother] can’t manage for her'” (5). Readers are able to see how the mother in this story, like many other mothers, is continually positioned between what is expected of her, regarding her role as a mother, and what she is capable of.
As in Yonnondio, Olsen successfully juxtaposes the ideal of what experts prescribe should be done with the conflicting reality of what, in actuality, can be done. The mother in "I Stand Here Ironing" had to work to provide an income, shelter and food for her daughter. She could not choose to keep Emily at home with her. She could not choose Emily's day care providers or her teachers when Emily became old enough to attend school. Circumstances would not allow it.

As stated earlier, this story begins and ends with an indictment of society's expectations. The final sentence inverts the initial request from "you" to a plea from the mother toward "you" who requested information and assistance in helping her child. Olsen's unique re-presentation of motherhood in this story encourages readers to understand a mother's perspective. This mother does not automatically assume total responsibility for her child's behavior without pausing to reflect. After carefully and painfully sifting through all of the choices she made while raising her daughter, she comes to realize, along with the reader, that the majority of the time the mother's choices were not really choices at all. Ultimately realizing the powerlessness she feels toward affecting, in any substantial way, how her daughter turns out, the mother asks you to "help [Emily] to know - help make it so there is cause for her to know - that she is more than this dress on the ironing board, helpless before the iron" (12). By ending the story in this way Olsen effectively turns this mother's reflections into a convincing argument against the all-knowing yet ever-changing experts in the fields of medicine, psychology, and education. It is also an argument focused on all of us who are co-opted into believing, without questioning, what these experts purport and perpetuate.
The re-presentations of motherhood in *Yonnondio* and in "I Stand Here Ironing" are effective in appealing to a large audience because of Olsen’s subtle and simultaneous direct/indirect style in approaching the reader. In *Yonnondio* the successful re-presentation of motherhood is due in large part to Olsen’s adept and accurate perceptions of her readers and her knowledge of the expectations and assumptions readers bring with them when approaching a story. Olsen, like so many other readers during this time, had been educated and accustomed to reading literature written from either a child’s or a man’s perspective. Most people, and particularly those in the early to mid-twentieth century, do not expect to read a story presented from a mother’s perspective, and particularly not from a mother with an *individual*'s perspective.

In retrospect we can see that Olsen advanced a step further in the more direct and concise re-presentation of motherhood illustrated in "I Stand Here Ironing." Olsen had experienced life as a mother for twenty years when she sat down to write "I Stand Here Ironing." The urgency of the message Olsen wished to convey to her readers in this story is evident because of its content, but also because of its concise and direct style. It appears as if Olsen had waited far too long for mothers to be re-presented as relevant and serious individuals, capable of more than silently accepting responsibility for all of society’s condemnations and expectations of them. Her indictment of *you* in this story reveals Olsen’s insistence that we need to acknowledge the validity of this mother’s message as well as society’s portion of responsibility for the problems manifested in the life of her child.
Chapter Two: Sylvia Plath

When we think of Sylvia Plath, we may think of "Daddy", "Lady Lazarus", or her poems that refer to suicide or death. Some may think of _The Bell Jar_ or mental illness. For many, thoughts of motherhood are not the first that are associated with Sylvia Plath or her poetry. This is evident by the relatively small number of critical essays that explore re-presentations of motherhood in Plath's writing.

Even though Plath is not as well known for her poems related to motherhood, during the last three years of her life (1960-63), there is much in her poetry that includes references to maternal identity, children, and/or motherhood. Poems such as "You're", "Morning Song", "For a Fatherless Son", "Nick and the Candlestick", "Child", and "Balloons" directly relate to the experience of motherhood, while many others contain a line or more reflecting the maternal. Commenting on this in his book _Sylvia Plath: A Critical Study_ (2001), Tim Kendall surmises that "[t]he number of examples relating specifically to fertility indicates the extent to which Plath formulates female identity – the 'real' life she describes in correspondence with her mother – in terms of childbirth and motherhood" (61). Kendall acknowledges that Plath's identity as a mother was only one identity among several that she explored but, as we shall see, it became a significant influence on her later poetry.

During the early 1960s, when Plath was experiencing motherhood and exploring herself as a mother, many women were just beginning to feel the option of freedom presented by educational and economic opportunities. Although the possibility of women being able to obtain intellectual and economic independence appears advantageous theoretically, Plath's poetry reveals otherwise. Many of her poems
illustrate the paradox created when possibilities for women collide with reality. The reality during Plath’s lifetime, and the reality that still exists for many women today, is that social conventions encouraged women to continue in their subservient roles of wife and mother. Both Plath and her poetry embody and confront this paradox which is why feelings of inadequacy, anger, and despair are predominant in so much of her writing.

Confronting and highlighting significant differences between the ideal and real are everywhere in Plath’s poetry. Her poems containing re-presentations of motherhood are no different. Plath was well aware of what was expected of her – in her role as a student, in her role as a writer, and eventually in her role as a mother. Her journal entries and letters home reveal that she was also both introspective and critical – of herself and of the world around her. In a journal entry from December 28, 1958, Plath writes:

I felt if I didn’t write nobody would accept me as a human being. Writing, then, [is] a substitute for myself: if you don’t love me, love my writing & love me for my writing. It is also much more: a way of ordering and reordering the chaos of experience. (The Journals of Sylvia Plath, 449)

The angst in Plath’s poetry is inspired by her life experiences which were full of contradictions between the ideal and the real. The number of these contradictions did not decrease after she experienced life as a mother.

Reflections and repudiations in “Candles”

One poem that re-presents motherhood, on more than one level, is “Candles.” Plath briefly comments on this poem in a letter written to her mother on
October 26, 1960: "[this] poem is about candles and reminiscences of grammy and grampy in Austria spoken while nursing Frieda by candlelight at 2 a.m. I'm very fond of it" (Letters Home, 397). Direct references to her work such as this make it difficult for a reader to refrain from making comparisons between Plath's personal life and the content of her poems. Plath gave birth to Frieda on April 1, 1960, so by the time this poem was written she had experienced motherhood for a little over six months.

As we may gather from the letter written to her mother, the speaker in "Candles" is breastfeeding her child in the candlelit darkness of the early morning hours. Contrary to what we might expect from a poem about a mother who is nursing her child, we do not hear a child's cry of hunger in the lines of this poem or read any expressions of this mother feeling tired because it is necessary for her to be awake at this hour. Readers are instead taken on a contemplative journey, along with the speaker, to consider the beauty of candles and the unique light that emanates from them. Thoughts of candles elicit distinctions between past and present and progress to visions of grandparents whose lives are now spent. Subsequently, thoughts of the past lead the speaker to understand her position in history and her reflections reveal the limitations of her knowledge. The speaker can only envision her grandmother "As a schoolgirl" (18) and what it was like for her to grow up in Austria. She can only imagine how her grandfather felt in his expectations of what life would be like in America.

The last two stanzas of "Candles" bring us back to the present, and it is only now we find out that the speaker in this poem is a mother:

The eyes of the child I nurse are scarcely open.
In twenty years I will be retrograde

As these draughty ephemerids. (28-30)

Instead of focusing intently on her child throughout the poem, Plath allows this mother to be a person first, a person who is considering her surroundings, a person who envisions a past and how she is positioned between past, present, and future.

The candles in this poem are used as a metaphor for mothers/motherhood. A mother is like a candle because she is supposed to enlighten her child but, like a candle’s light, this mother realizes that she can illuminate her child only dimly. The draft is symbolic of outside influences always threatening to distort or extinguish the light/knowledge she is capable of providing.

The last stanza poetically reiterates and emphasizes these sentiments as the mother watches the candles and again compares herself to them:

I watch their spilt tears cloud and dull to pearls.

How shall I tell anything at all

To this infant still in a birth-drowse?

Tonight, like a shawl, the mild light enfolds her,

The shadows stoop over like guests at a christening. (28-35)

The shadows represent all of the influential individuals who will come into contact with her child throughout the child’s lifetime. This poem, on one level, eloquently illustrates how one mother perceives herself in relation to her child. She realizes that, ultimately, she is only one person, one influence, in her child’s life.
A deeper understanding

One distinguishing characteristic of a good poem is that it can be reread again and again, with each successive reading providing new insight or, if it is good enough, revealing a totally different level of meaning. A rereading of this poem is essential if one is to fully grasp its multi-dimensional quality and also its significance. Once we have read the last two stanzas of "Candles" and realize that it can be read as a re-presentation of motherhood, the whole poem can be read again in a different light.

As we have seen, "Candles" can be read and understood first from a person's, then from a mother's perspective, as an illustration of a mother comprehending her limited role in the life of her child. Upon a second and third reading, it becomes increasingly clear that this is not merely a poem reflecting one mother's thoughts on her surroundings. Each succeeding line in this poem turns into a condemnation of mothers/others who perpetuate the distorted myth of mother being the major participant in motherhood, the all-knowing, all-caring, and also the all-responsible and all-decisive factor in how a child progresses through life.

If we understand that candles can be seen as a metaphor for mothers, the first line takes on an assertive tone. The speaker asserts that "They [mothers] are the last romantics" (1). In the second line, instead of the light being emitted in the shape of an upright heart, i.e. providing love/knowledge that is honest, the light that is emitted is upside down. The poem then begins to elicit a more ominous tone, one that continues with the following lines:

And the fingers, taken in by their own haloes,
Grown milky, almost clear, like the bodies of saints.
It is touching, the way they'll ignore

A whole family of prominent objects
Simply to plumb the deeps of an eye. (3-7)

These lines can be interpreted as targeting mothers who have been co-opted into the patriarchal myth of motherhood, those who have come to believe that mothers are either angels or demons. The speaker goes on to sarcastically emphasize how their ignorance of the reality that surrounds them, which includes more than just a family, is touching, but unrealistic and self-serving. The homophonic quality of “eye” in line seven allows it to be interpreted also (or either) as “I.”

The spatial separation of thought that occurs between “ignore” in the first stanza and “A whole family” in the second emphasizes not only the ignorance, but also that which is being ignored. Plath strategically repeats this separation of a thought between each stanza in the poem, encouraging the reader to notice this additional level of meaning. The second and third stanzas are both separated by and connected with the admonition that “Daylight would be more judicious/Giving everybody a fair hearing” (10-11). In other words, we need to realize the reality of our existence and acknowledge that everything and everybody who surrounds a child is incorporated into that child’s life to some degree. The third and fourth stanzas again point a finger at a conforming “they” when we read that “Their pale, tentative yellows/Drag up false Edwardian sentiments” (15-16) in the speaker.
Upon first reading this poem the identity of “the owner past thirty, no beauty at all” (9) could be confusing. Who is this owner “in its hollow of shadows, its fringe of reeds” (8)? Since this individual is in the shadows, it has to be someone outside the aura of the candlelight, someone outside of the mother’s presence. Provided with the insight of this closer analysis, it would not be a great leap to infer that, historically, “the owner” in the second stanza could be Sigmund Freud, the owner/instigator of popular discourse purporting the (mostly devastating) significance of the mother in a child’s life.

In her book *Motherhood and Representation: The Mother in Popular Culture and Melodrama* (1992), E. Ann Kaplan writes that Freud and “his theory of the unconscious [...] did not lead to discussion of the mother’s subjectivity; rather it produced the mother as the one through whom ‘I,’ the child, become a subject” (8). Freud’s theories became widely read and discussed over thirty years before Plath wrote this poem. Understanding the influence that experts in the field of psychoanalysis had (and still have) on society, Kaplan writes that “psychoanalytic theory as a discourse itself produc[ed] certain powerful mother representations, particularly in the post-Freud period” (10). The angel/demon misrepresentations of motherhood that followed in the wake of Freud’s published theories are likely ones that Plath was familiar with and therefore used, at least in part, as an impetus for the multi-dimensional qualities of this poem. The weight of the myth of woman as either angel or demon, perpetuated through centuries of literature, is a myth that Plath was aware of and is a force that she alternately acknowledges and repudiates in many of
her poems. In its re-presentation of motherhood, “Candles” is another example of the myth-shattering that occurs in Plath’s poetry.

The influence of motherhood

For those who disregard or dismiss the influence that motherhood had on Plath as a person and as a writer, it is interesting to consider our own views – both men and women - on mothers who are writers or mothers who are trying to succeed in a still-predominantly man’s world. As mentioned earlier, in “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision” (1972) Adrienne Rich asserts that, historically, “to a lesser or a greater extent, every woman writer has written for men even when, like Virginia Woolf, she was supposed to be addressing women” (20). Throughout the majority of her adult life Plath was struggling to succeed in a man’s world. The poems in The Colossus (1960) reflect a side of Plath that was steeped in, and deeply influenced by, literary and poetic traditions of men. In a journal entry written during the spring of 1951 Plath admitted trying to repress any sentiment related to her female side:

...I am part man, and I notice women’s breasts and thighs with the calculation of a man choosing his mistress... but that is the artist and the analytical attitude toward the female body... for I am more a woman; even as I long for full breasts and a beautiful body, so do I abhor the sensuousness which they bring... I desire the things which will destroy me in the end... (55)

Even though this was written early in Plath’s life, it provides insight into how she was trying, at an early age, to reconcile her identity as both female and artist. This attempt at reconciliation became more complicated when she became a mother. By 1960 Plath was decidedly more comfortable with herself as both woman and writer,
but when she became a mother a whole new set of expectations were placed on her – by society and by herself.

The extent to which Plath’s daily life experiences provide the impetus for her writing is widely known and discussed in literary circles. However, the significance of her experience of life as both mother and writer and the extent to which motherhood is reflected in her writing are revealed by Plath herself in “Context,” an essay she wrote in 1962. In this essay she poses the question of whether or not the issues of the time “influence the kind of poetry [she] write[s]” (*Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*, 64). She answers this question by writing, “Yes, but in a sidelong fashion. [...] My poems do not turn out to be about Hiroshima, but about a child forming itself finger by finger in the dark” (64). She goes on to acknowledge that:

For [her], the real issues of our time are the issues of every time – the hurt and wonder of loving; making in all its forms – children, loaves of bread, paintings, buildings; and the conservation of life of all people in all places, the jeopardizing of which no abstract doubletalk of ‘peace’ or ‘implacable foes’ can excuse. (*Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*, 64-5)

These are words, both in the question posed and in the answer provided, not hastily dictated from an interview. These are words that Plath wrote down with careful thought and introspection. And these words could easily be used to define motherhood, which embodies, reflects, and contributes to the issues of every time, the hurt and wonder of loving, and making in all its forms. Furthermore, motherhood, in its most basic form, is about the conservation of all people in all places. It is curious, then, that the word motherhood is not present in this essay.
Perhaps not so curious if one considers the connotations and inferior status of woman that is implied whenever the term "mother" is used.

The conflict between motherhood and self

We may assess, from what Plath wrote in "Context" and also from the number of poems she wrote related to the maternal, that the experience of motherhood was an integral factor in defining how she viewed the world. We have also seen how her experience with motherhood is significantly incorporated into "Candles." Plath's daily conflict between her identity as a writer and her identity as a mother is a conflict that is displayed in nearly all of her final poems.

In order to understand the degree to which Plath was consumed by this conflict and how the conflict between motherhood and self is predominant in so many of her final poems, it is necessary to understand how she was feeling at this time by reading a few of her letters home to her mother. On May 30, 1960, two months after Frieda was born Plath writes: "The baby's feedings and keeping the house clean, cooking and taking care of Ted's voluminous mail, plus my own, have driven me so I care only for carving out hours where I can start my own writing" (Letters Home, 384). Because of a limited amount of space in their apartment in London, Plath was forced to write in Frieda's nursery. Although she tries to adapt to surroundings that were less than adequate for her needs as a writer, the limited amount of space and time eventually begins to affect her ability to write. On August 27, 1960 she reveals that "I really hunger for a study of my own out of hearing of the nursery where I could be alone with my thoughts for a few hours a day. I really believe I could do some good stories if I had a stretch of time without distractions" (Letters Home, 392).
After her second child, Nicholas, is born in February of 1962, the family has moved into a house and she has a separate area in which to write, but the conflict between motherhood and Plath's desire to write becomes increasingly pronounced in her letters to her mother. On March 24, 1962 she writes:

I am managing to get about two and a bit more hours in my study in the mornings and hope to make it four when I can face getting up at six, which I hope will be as soon as Nicholas stops waking for a night feeding. The day seems to just fly by after noon, though, and I am lucky if I get a fraction of the baking or writing or reading or studying done that I want to. \((Letters\ Home, 448)\)

As one might expect, the constant tension represented in this letter only increases after Plath's separation from Ted Hughes later that same year. Contrary to popular belief, Plath was not receiving any substantial income from her writing at this time. When she was living on her own with Frieda and Nicholas, she barely had enough money to pay their living expenses and later, when she moved with her children to London, she was using her bedroom or the kitchen as places in which to write.

In his book \textit{Sylvia Plath: A Critical Study} (2001), Tim Kendall comments on the significance of the maternal and motherhood in Plath's later poetry. He surmises that at this time in her life “Plath seeks an identity freed from the maternal role, not dependent on it” (62). To support this he cites a letter that Plath wrote on January 16, 1963 in which she explains to her mother: “I just haven't felt to have any \textit{identity} under the steamroller of decisions and responsibilities of the last half of the year, with the babies a constant demand” \((Letters\ Home, 495)\). It is evident from this
excerpt of Plath's letter that she, like many other mothers, is struggling to maintain her sense of self, a self that cannot be separated from her role as a mother and now also as the head of her household.

The conflict re-presented in poetry

Nearly all of the poems Plath wrote during the last few months of her life are representative, in different ways, of the continuous turmoil she was feeling at this time. The first stanza of "Sheep in Fog" presents a vision of the angst the speaker feels over an inability to satisfy anyone:

The hills step off into whiteness.

People or stars

Regard me sadly, I disappoint them. (1-3)

Although Plath is recorded to have written this in December of 1962, she went back and revised it in January 1963, changing the final stanza from "Patriarchs till now immobile/In heavenly wool/Roll off as stones or clouds with the faces of babes" (13-15) to the more ominous "They threaten/To let me through to a heaven/Starless and fatherless, a dark water" (13-15).

"The Munich Mannequins" opens with a thought-provoking line that effectively and concisely reflects a mother's response to motherhood: "Perfection is terrible, it cannot have children" (1). "Totem" is illustrative of the various demands being placed on a mother, one piled on top of another. In this poem the engine/demands kills the track/mother. Even though "It stretches into the distance. It will be eaten nevertheless./Its running is useless" (1-2). As readers are able to see, the degree of futility and despair emanating from the lines of Plath's later poems becomes
increasingly and progressively more pronounced. Instead of the strong, reflective mother in "Candles," the mother in "Child," a poem that Plath wrote two and a half years later, is "troubulous" (10) with "Wringing of hands, this dark/Ceiling without a star" (11-12). The mother in "Child" is dark and has no more light to guide her child.

Even though the speakers in "Paralytic" and "Gigolo" are males, these poems also contain maternal symbols. It is as if Plath is striking out, as she often does in her poetry, at the injustice of men/fathers being allowed to walk away from their responsibilities/children while women/mothers are expected to remain constant and loyal to those same responsibilities.

Re-presentations of motherhood are easy to see in "Balloons," but "Mystic", "Kindness", "Words", "Contusion", and finally "Edge" all contain direct references to motherhood and all reflect the internal angst and acute despair over an inability to reconcile conflicting tensions. In "Edge" we see that "The woman is perfected" (1) only in death. The mother in this poem is able to take her children along with her, "Each dead child coiled, a white serpent,/One at each little pitcher of milk, now empty./She has folded/Them back into her body" (9-13). The speaker in this poem, like the speaker in "Candles," is nursing her children but, unlike the mother in Plath's earlier poem, this mother is empty. She has been emptied of any nourishment that she can provide her children and they are dead to her.

Another similarity found when comparing "Candles" and "Edge" is that both contain the word moon. If we compare how moon is used in both poems, we are able to see another significant loss of hope. In Plath's earlier poem, the light of the candles, "Kindly with invalids and mawkish women" (25) is able to "mollify the bald
moon” (26), but in the final lines of “Edge” the moon is personified as a woman who will not be appeased or subdued:

The moon has nothing to be sad about,
Staring from her hood of bone.

She is used to this sort of thing.

Her blacks crackle and drag. (16-20)

The moon in “Edge” is personified and may be construed as those who conform and perpetuate the myths of motherhood. The moon in this poem, as well as all of those she represents, will continue on indifferently.

Until readers are able to comprehend and value the significance of motherhood and all of the emotional, intellectual, psychological, and physical challenges it presents, particularly when these responsibilities are placed solely on one person, we will not be able to understand the significance of how “her blacks crackle and drag” (20) in this vivid re-presentation of motherhood.
Chapter Three: Comparisons

Since lived experiences are interwoven extensively into the writings of Sylvia Plath and Tillie Olsen it is important to include at least a brief description of some of the life experienced by each. Understanding some of the personal details in the lives of these two authors will enhance later comparisons of their writings by revealing differences and similarities, and will also provide a more comprehensive understanding of each author's unique ability to re-present motherhood.

A comparison of time and circumstance

Tillie Olsen was born in a small Nebraska town in 1912 or 1913. As Constance Coiner explains in her biographical sketch of Olsen in Better Red: The Writing and Resistance of Tillie Olsen and Meridel Le Seur (1995), neither the time nor the place of Olsen's birth was recorded and consequently, neither is known with any degree of certainty (143). Olsen grew up in a working-class family and her formal education ended at the eleventh grade (Coiner, 144-45). When Olsen was nineteen she gave birth to her first child and experienced motherhood as a single mother for four years (1932-36) before she met and eventually married Jack Olsen. After their marriage Olsen gave birth to three more daughters.

Although Sylvia Plath was born approximately twenty years after Olsen, there is much more than time that separates the lives of these two individuals. Plath was born on October 27, 1932 to educated parents who lived in Jamaica Plain, Massachusetts. In contrast to Olsen, Plath grew up in a middle-class environment and eventually obtained a Master of Arts degree from Cambridge University in Oxford, England. Unlike Olsen, Plath did not have to begin working at a young age
to help her family out financially, and she had the additional advantage of growing up in a home that had books and a mother who was able to read to her. In contrast to Olsen, Plath gave birth to her first child at the age of twenty-seven and, therefore, was able to devote a greater amount of time and energy to her writing before she began to experience motherhood for herself.

Plath's close relationship with her writing is most clearly illustrated in the lines of her poem "Stillborn." After reading this poem, we begin to understand that this relationship is decidedly one that is maternal. In "Stillborn" Plath personifies poems by writing, "These poems do not live: it's a sad diagnosis./They grew their toes and fingers well enough,/Their little foreheads bulged with concentration" (1-3). Although these infant poems never quite make it to adulthood (or into a book), the speaker in this poem reveals that "It wasn't for any lack of mother-love" (5). The mother-love articulated in the words of "Stillborn" is a mother-love that Plath experienced first in relation to her poems, and only later in relation to her children. This poem was written in July of 1960, four months after Plath gave birth to her first child, Frieda, but the emotions conveyed in the lines of "Stillborn" reveal that Plath's relationship with her poetry is a deep and nurturing one, and it is this closeness to her writing that further complicates any attempt to distinctly separate motherhood from Plath's writing.

In an interview with Constance Coiner concerning the separation of motherhood and writing, Olsen states that "children and art 'are different aspects of your being' [...] There is...no separation.' A life combining meaningful work and motherhood 'could and should be' possible for women" (Better Red: The Writing and Resistance...
of Tillie Olsen and Meridel Le Sueur, 147). Although it is clear that both Plath and Olsen incorporated their lived experiences, motherhood included, into their writing, neither was able to sustain their meaningful work, which was writing. Olsen’s assertion that children and art are merely different aspects of your being and are not separate but must (or should) be successfully integrated in some ways contradicts the reality of what happened to the writing of both Olsen and Plath.

Both of these writers’ voices were silenced by suicide. Olsen’s literary voice was progressively silenced throughout the twenty years she bore and raised her children, many times working outside the home as well (Silences, 19). In Olsen’s presentation for the Radcliffe Institute in 1962 she speaks of her personal experiences, of mere “snatches of time” that she had for writing, and also about the “time when this triple life was no longer possible. The fifteen hours of daily realities became too much distraction for the writing. I lost craziness of endurance” (Silences, 19-20). Over these two decades Olsen reveals that eventually “[her] work died. What demanded to be written, did not” (Silences, 20), but when there was finally time to write, her writer’s voice did not recover.

In the early 1960s Plath shared a dilemma similar to that of Olsen’s. After the birth of her first child, Plath was also positioned between the conflicting pulls of writing and motherhood, and this tension only increased after the birth of her second child. The month of October 1962 is a specific period of time in which Plath is noted for writing a significant amount of poetry, but it is also a time in which she is desperately struggling to juggle her responsibilities as both mother and writer. On October 18, 1962 she writes to her mother: “I adore the babies and am glad to have
them, even though now they make my life fantastically difficult. If I can just financially get through this year, I should have time to get a good nanny" (Letters Home, 473). An adequate amount of time, as Olsen points out in Silences (1978), is essential for a writer and, as this letter indicates, time is what Plath is desperate for. As many writers know, creativity does not adhere to a schedule, and although Plath struggled valiantly in her "craziness of endurance," her writer's voice, like Olsen's, was ultimately lost.

A comparison of style

Olsen began writing Yonnondio in 1932, the same year that Plath was born, and there are sections in the book where Olsen's writing reflects, with striking similarity, both the tone and style of Plath's later writing. One of these sections in particular stands out and invites a thoughtful comparison between the two authors. It is distinct because of its noticeable shift in narrative voice, but also because it so clearly reflects Plath's definitive style.

As mentioned earlier, Olsen's narrator in Yonnondio is omniscient and throughout most of the novel is relating events that are happening or revealing thoughts of various characters. At intermittent times, however, the narrator ceases or leaves the story for a brief time. These interludes are separated from the text spatially as well as by their unique narrative voice. At these times the narrator appears as if he or she is speaking directly to the reader, letting us in on a more personal view of what is happening at the time.

At an early point in the novel, this personal speaker is provoked by the sound of a whistle and all that this ominous sound represents to a mining community. The
sound of a whistle in this story signifies that an accident has occurred in the mines. The narration that follows is inspired additionally by the summoned group of women and children with tearless faces, waiting in quiet and agonizing anticipation to find out whether or not a husband, brother, or son has been killed or maimed in the mines. The sharp and direct targeting of “you” in the following lines could again be interpreted as referring to all of us. It is also Olsen’s literary reproduction of the whistle’s sound:

And could you not make a cameo of this and pin it onto your aesthetic hearts? So sharp it is, so clear, so classic. The shattered dusk, the mountain of culm, the tipple; clean lines, bare beauty – and carved against them, dwarfed by the vastness of night and the towering tipple, these black figures with bowed heads, waiting, waiting. (28-29).

Olsen’s narrative repetition of a single word, the alliteration, and her use of the word “classic” all combine in the concise, yet defining, “So sharp it is, so clear, so classic.” These same characteristics conceptually and artistically preconceive Plath’s mature voice in her later poetry.

Olsen’s unexpected use of the word “shattered” to describe the dusk, and her use of “the shattered dusk” as the first illustration or layer in what eventually comprises a dense accumulation of visions/layers shatters, like Plath’s “Totem,” any expectations a reader may have. The darkness drawn by the expansiveness of night precedes, sets the stage for, and also serves to emphasize “these black figures with bowed heads,” another phrase that evokes images often portrayed in Plath’s poetry. The paragraph concludes with a vivid description of the anticipation felt among the
women and children, expressed by the simple repetitive enunciation of the "waiting, waiting."

Proceeding with an unflinching vision, the defiant tone of Plath's "Edge" is also here in *Yonnondio* with Olsen's speaker. In the lines that follow Olsen remains consistent in her poetic combination of alliteration, rhythmic repetition, and assertive tone:

Surely it is classical enough for you — the Greek marble of the women, the simple, flowing lines of sorrow, carved so rigid and eternal. Surely it is original enough — these grotesques, this thing with the foot missing, the gargoyle with half the face gone and the arm. (*Yonnondio*, 29)

These lines project anger and frustration at "your" inability to see or do something about the grave injustices being experienced by these people. At the same time, a strong sense of sadness and urgency is also projected through this text. Readers get the sense, from the words "classical," "rigid," "eternal," and "original," that these are injustices that have been experienced for centuries. The type of work that is being done is the only distinguishing characteristic between past and present, and this distinguishing characteristic is deliberately and noticeably absent, effectively disintegrating any perceived gap between past and present.

Defining the present through its relationship with the past is a distinct quality of Plath's poetry. A pronounced and effective literary discord is created by continually juxtaposing what is perceived as ideal with what is known or experienced as real. These are the defining tools that both Olsen and Plath employ extensively in their re-presentations of motherhood.
The tension between perfection in an ideal world and imperfections existent in the real world is evident in Plath’s “Morning Song” (February 19, 1961). In one stanza she dispels a common misconception of motherhood by stating:

I’m no more your mother

Than the cloud that distils a mirror to reflect its own slow Effacement at the wind’s hand. (7-9)

The mother/speaker in this poem is simultaneously voicing her own perspective as well as the perceived perspective of her infant child. On one level, Plath presents a unique mother’s perspective, a perspective that associates and identifies itself with a cloud or, in other words, this mother sees herself as merely another presence provided by nature. By recognizing herself in this way, the mother in this poem is emphatically ridding herself of all the judgments and condemnations heaped on her.

This is emphasized further by the preceding stanza which, on another level, may be interpreted as the mother imagining, or providing a voice for, her newborn child’s perspective, a child who is not able to distinguish his or her mother from anyone or anything else: “Our voices echo, magnifying your arrival” (4) and “We stand round blankly as walls” (6). Instead of creating a birth scene with an instantaneous mother/infant bond in “Morning Song,” Plath creates a unique re-presentation of motherhood that reflects the reality of lived experience. A new person, a life distinctly separate from the mother, is born. The newborn child in this poem has no knowledge of his or her mother, no preconceived notions of the responsibilities a mother may or may not assume. The mother in this poem is just another voice in the room, just another round and blank figure to her child.
Other voices

As alluded to earlier, there have been few critical essays exploring the maternal in Plath’s poetry. One noteworthy exception is “‘I have tried and tried’: Culpable Mothers and Maternal Guilt in Sylvia Plath” (1996) by María Sánchez. In this essay, Sánchez analyzes “Morning Song” and argues that Plath’s writing positions her “on the thin line where poetry and children, production and reproduction, meet” (*Theory @ Buffalo*, 128). Sanchez goes on to assert that

the maternal personas that Plath created in her poetry are [...] occasionally happy, amused, content, but more often anguished, confused, wracked by guilt and self-contempt. It is these poetic voices that suggest how notions of failure and guilt inform maternal identities. (128)

My intent in focusing on Plath and her later poetry has been to uncover and explore Plath’s position as a mother and how motherhood is reflected in her poetry. I have also tried to reveal a few of the unique maternal personas included in Plath’s poetry but, as Sánchez states, there are many. Maternal representations of the “happy,” “amused,” or “content” are included in the vast majority of published works. In this analysis I chose to focus on a few of the “anguished, confused, wracked by guilt and self-contempt” voices of motherhood, while also adding to this list the intellectual, serious, thoughtful, and introspective maternal voices that are extensive in Plath’s poetry.

In contrast to Plath, many critical essays have explored the maternal in Olsen’s writing. In “On the Side of the Mother: Yonnondio and Call It Sleep” (1993), Elaine Orr writes that in *Yonnondio* Olsen “[enables] readers to view the novel’s scenes
with Anna — from the ‘contradictory’ positions of mother and worker, sexual object and enduring voice [and] Olsen positions readers on the mother’s side” (Studies in American Fiction, 211). Like Sánchez’s analysis of Plath, Orr’s description of Olsen positions her on the thin maternal/authorial line, but Orr’s observation of Olsen’s writing in Yonnondio goes even further by asserting that Olsen encourages readers to read from a different perspective, that of the working mother’s. In Chapter One I chose specific areas of Yonnondio and “I Stand Here Ironing” to emphasize this aspect of Olsen’s writing. It was my intent to emphasize Olsen’s re-presentation of motherhood as uniquely realistic. The character of Anna in Yonnondio, and also the mother in “I Stand Here Ironing” both re-present mothers as Plath did – as thinking, feeling, and many times angry human beings.
Chapter Four: Conclusion

The mothers/motherhood re-presented in the writings of both Olsen and Plath invite and encourage a deeper appreciation for a mother's perspective. Motherhood, in each of their re-presentations, is experienced first and foremost by individuals and, because their re-presentations of motherhood are full of thoughts, emotions, and physical limitations experienced by all individuals, they present motherhood as an experience that can – and should – be assumed by more than just mothers. The mothers in their writings are not mythical creatures. They are hardly angels and, perhaps even more importantly, they are not demons. As the mother/speaker reveals in the poetic lines of Plath's "Candles," so many women have been co-opted into believing the myths related to women and motherhood and, as Adrienne Rich asserts in "Notes toward a Politics of Location," change can only occur with an informed and historical perspective of our place in the world and a greater awareness of how our perceived roles serve to shape and define us in ways that are many times unrealistic and limiting.

While focusing on the writings of these two women and on the various ways that motherhood is re-presented in their writings, it became increasingly apparent to me that in order for change to occur on a level that is widespread we need to revise more than just our representations of motherhood. We need to revise the way we approach and interpret mothers and motherhood as they have been, and still are being, traditionally represented in literature. We also need to revise our attitude toward mothers who are writers and, if applicable, cease to ignore the significance of
the motherhood dimension in their lives and in their writing. Adrienne Rich asserts in "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision" that just as woman is becoming her own midwife, creating herself anew, so man will have to learn to gestate and give birth to his own subjectivity – something he has frequently wanted woman to do for him. We can go on trying to talk to each other, we can sometimes help each other, poetry and fiction can show us what the other is going through; but women can no longer be primarily mothers and muses for men. (College English, 25)

Although Rich’s message, written over thirty years ago, was directed primarily to the western world and, more specifically, to white males, it is sadly still relevant today.

Plath and Olsen have each played a vital role in establishing new literary ground by re-presenting motherhood from an individual's perspective, an individual that is often struggling with internal conflicts that reflect contradictions experienced when myth and reality collide. Both authors are fearless in their ability to consistently confront this collision and convey its accompanying distress. By juxtaposing the past with the present, both writers emphasize the perpetual nature of myths and the contradictions that result when reality does not measure up to assumptions and expectations. The direct and assertive tone, as well as the concise style of their writing reveals an urgent desire for change(s). It is my hope that the focus of this analysis will facilitate change by encouraging a more thoughtful re-vision of twentieth century re-presentations of motherhood.
Appendix

“Candles”

They are the last romantics, these candles:
Upside down hearts of light tipping wax fingers,
And the fingers, taken in by their own haloes,
Grown milky, almost clear, like the bodies of saints.
It is touching, the way they’ll ignore

A whole family of prominent objects
Simply to plumb the deeps of an eye
In its hollow of shadows, its fringe of reeds,
And the owner past thirty, no beauty at all.
Daylight would be more judicious,

Giving everybody a fair hearing.
They should have gone out with balloon flights and the stereopticon.
This is no time for the private point of view.
When I light them, my nostrils prickle.
Their pale, tentative yellows

Drag up false, Edwardian sentiments,
And I remember my maternal grandmother from Vienna.
As a schoolgirl she gave roses to Franz Josef.
The burghers sweated and wept. The children wore white.
And my grandfather moped in the Tyrol,

Imagining himself a headwaiter in America,
Floating in a high-church hush
Among ice buckets, frosty napkins.
These little globes of light are sweet as pears.
Kindly with invalids and mawkish women,

They mollify the bald moon.
Nun-souled, they burn heavenward and never marry.
The eyes of the child I nurse are scarcely open.
In twenty years I shall be retrograde
As these draughty ephemerals.

I watch their spilt tears cloud and dull to pearls.
How shall I tell anything at all
To this infant still in a birth-drowse?
Tonight, like a shawl, the mild light enfolds her,
The shadows stoop over like guests at a christening.
References Cited


Sánchez, María C. “I have tried and tried: Culpable Mothers and Maternal Guilt in Sylvia Plath.” *Theory @ Buffalo* Fall 1996: 123-42.