2007 First Place Critical Analysis

Ironing Out Tillie Olsen

A mother stands before an ironing board, tool in hand, laboring in the way all mothers do. Suddenly, emotion overcomes her, memories flood her mind. In the short story, “I Stand Here Ironing” by Tillie Olsen, this is how the narrative begins. The mother is reflecting on the life of her oldest daughter Emily. Olsen conveys longing and love through stylistic techniques such as the use of time, stream of consciousness, and imagery and diction.

Most apparent in Olsen’s piece is a time warp. Through the use of flashbacks, and the flow of thought, both reader and narrator are transported back in time whenever a new memory comes along. There is a feeling of time folding back on itself. One moment the reader is listening to a young Emily make excuses to get out of school: “Momma, you look sick . . . I feel sick . . . the teachers aren’t there today, they’re sick” (406). The next image is of the narrator “[feeling] suddenly ill . . . [and putting] the iron down” (406). Quick jumps like this, from past to present, from memories to thoughts on them, have almost no transition, providing this warped sense of when you are.

Soon after, the mother tells how “the old man living in the back once said” that she needed to “smile at Emily more” and suddenly reflects on how she remembered “too late for Emily” (406). This instance reveals more about the purpose of Olsen’s use of time. It is not to portray Emily’s life through her mother’s flashbacks. If that was the point, Olsen would have written a story solely about Emily. Instead, Olsen is using time confusion to convey the mother’s feelings. It is as if past and present are one: “[Emily] is so lovely” now just as “she was a beautiful baby” then, and her mother loves her (410,
406). Yet along with that renewed caring, there is still a shadow of doubt and estrangement, as the mother “cannot endure it tonight” when she has “been dredging the past” (410).

Bringing time full-circle, the mother repeats herself in descriptions of Emily: “She was dark and thin and foreign-looking in a world where the prestige went to blondeness and curly hair and dimples, she was slow where glibness was prized” (410). These shortcomings have been overcome, but there are still some there as Emily “is a child . . . of depression, of war, of fear” (410). Yes, the mother is accepting her child, learning to love her anew, but there are still some issues that must be ironed out. Olsen’s lack of a specific time line helps the reader understand the mother’s complex emotions.

Aiding this mixed-up sense of time is that Olsen wrote using stream of consciousness. This piece is in true narrative form because the reader catches a glimpse of the thoughts of this mother. Despite lack of transitions in some places, it flows smoothly together. The sentence structure provides much of this effect. At times, the reader comes across long sentences, many times with lists like a mother’s mind would have. Just as Emily “would select beads and single earrings, bottle tops and shells, dried flowers and pebbles, old postcards and scraps, all sorts of oddments,” there are times when Olsen writes ramblings into the mother’s thoughts, providing us with the experience of being inside her head (408).

In contrast to the long sentences, there are short sentences as well. These terse, little sentences always appear at tense places in the narrative, spots where the mother is disappointed with events and prefers to hurry past them: “All the baby loveliness gone” or “She did not get well” (406, 407). These short tid-bits propel the story forward; these areas are places critical to the story, but too painful or distressing for the mother to linger on. They are used as transitions in the time flow, “She is coming,” or sometimes even to express joy: “She is so lovely” (409, 410). They push the reader on through to the longer sentences.
No person thinks only in quick, simple sentences (unintelligent and boring) or drawn-out descriptions and listings (overbearing and also boring). Just like reality, Olsen’s structure is varied, sprinkled with different punctuation and forms. Many sentences start with “Oh;” there are dashes and parenthesis to indicate side thoughts. Through this stream of consciousness, Olsen unlocks the narrator’s mind. The reader needs to build a connection with the characters, and the best way to accomplish that is to be the character—be the mother moving “back and forth with the iron,” think her thoughts and live in her mind (405).

Another technique Olsen uses is imagery. She has a way with painting pictures using her words; it is possible for the reader to view these memories, not just be told about them. But Olsen’s imagery does more than just show the reader what is going on. Through diction, Olsen transports the reader into the mother’s mind and back in time. It is almost as if watching a movie. The reader can see, hear, feel, understand everything around them. When describing baby Emily “patting the [floor] so hard in ecstasy her hands and feet would blur,” Olsen says “she blew shining bubbles of sound” (406). The reader visualizes a “beautiful baby” crawling around, making spit bubbles, but so happy (406). Babbling, cooing, giggling. The tiny, chubby countenance radiates the “shining” light that comes with contentment and love (406).

When describing the convalescent home, Olsen, through the mother, describes it as “a handsome place, green lawns and tall trees and fluted flower beds” (407). But her other diction allows the reader to see the true side of this place. There is an “invisible wall,” barring outsiders and love (407). The children wear “ravaged looks” (407). Most importantly is the word “shriek.” Through this simple word, used multiple times in this section to describe talking, brings the fear home to the reader. It captures the image of separation and worry and shows the reader the scared faces of these love-deprived children.
Olsen’s diction clearly expresses the image and feeling she is trying to convey to the reader. Word choices like “tormented,” “curdled,” and “poisonous” show the “distracted mother” and her emotions toward her “child of anxious . . . love” (410). Random but few passages containing vivid, colorful words, like when Emily played with “physical lightness and brightness, twinkling by on skates, bouncing like a ball . . . , skimming over the hill,” bring snatches of a “momentary” happy past that was replaced with “clogged and clotted” love (408, 409). Without such varied word choice, Olsen could not color the picture. The story would be black lines without any meaning because the reader would not know the wide range of emotions within: worry, hurt, detachment, work, joy, pride, love.

Tillie Olsen ties different style techniques together to provide readers with the experience of raising a sickly, neglected child through her mother’s memories. The reader lives Emily’s troubled childhood and the worry of her mother. Olsen’s techniques transform a simple narrative into a living, breathing creature that grows past estrangement to, at least partially, “bloom” into a loving relationship full of a mother’s pride.
Works Cited