

A Psychoanalytic Interpretation of Mother-daughter Relationship in “I Stand Here Ironing”

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Abstract—“I Stand Here Ironing” is recognized as one of Tillie Olsen’s most anthologized works. As a biographical short story extracted from the writer’s own experience as a single mother, with the first daughter Clara as the prototype for Emily in the story, it relates how a single mother parents her first child Emily in the turmoil of the Great Depression. It has attracted interests of many scholars to explore the feminist themes of motherhood among the working class or Jewish identity in woman literature. However, psychoanalysis is seldom employed to tap the inner being of Emily and her mother so as to examine the dynamics of mother-daughter relationship. This paper aims to analyze the defense mechanisms adopted by Emily and her mother to explore their unconscious, so that we can have a better understanding about the mother-daughter relationship. Both Emily and her mother resort to certain defense mechanisms to protect their tortured ego and escape from the family as well as the real world. Finally, they bravely confront the reality and fulfill a harmonious return.

Index Terms—defense mechanism, “I Stand Here Ironing”, mother-daughter relationship, psychoanalysis, Tillie Olsen

I. INTRODUCTION

This section aims to briefly introduce the writer of “I stand Here Ironing” Tillie Olsen and then to examine the previous criticisms on her works.

A. Tillie Olsen as a Female Writer

Born in 1912, Tillie Olsen grew up in a Russian Jewish immigrant family. Both her mother and father had been engaged in the Russian revolution against the czar and had fled to the United States when the uprising failed (as cited in Pearlman & Werlock, 1991). This family background greatly influenced Tillie Olsen. As a child, Tillie Olsen had jobs tending her siblings and shelling peanuts after school even at 10. At 15, she dropped out of high school and officially entered the work force. She possessed rich experience working as a waitress, domestic worker, and meat trimmer. Besides, Olsen was passionate for reading. Influenced by the oratory of politicians such as Byran and Clarence Darrow, she became an enthusiast for political issues. As a member of American Communist Party, Olsen was once jailed for a short passage of time for organizing a packinghouse workers’ union in Kansas City. Her political commitment ineluctably inspired her urgent need to write (Pearlman & Werlock, 1991). All of those particular experiences make her a unique and representative voice in American literature.

Ranking among the first generation of American feminists, Olsen’s works are regarded as icon and have obtained great support from American women. Her writings are best known for “their close observation on the pain she herself went through and her detailed scrutiny on the social and political turmoil surrounding her since 1930s when she was just a teenager and thereafter” (Nur Fatin & Ida, 2014, p. 250). Her oeuvre is relatively small, containing a four-short-story collection *Tell Me a Riddle* (1961), one unfinished novel *Yonondio: From The Thirties* (1974), one nonfiction book *Silences* (1978), two edited collections of photographs by others, and several essays. *Tell Me a Riddle* was awarded the O. Henry Prize for best American short story in 1961. Three stories in *Tell Me a Riddle* are narrated from the mother’s perspective, among which “I Stand Here Ironing” is the first and the shortest one. As a female writer, she analyzes in *Silences* the silent periods in literature, including writers’ blocks, unpublished work, and the problems that working-class writers, women in particular, have encountered when they attempt to concentrate on art. Despite the limited number of her published works, Olsen’s unremitting efforts in speaking out for the working class, especially for the working women have earned her a significant position in American literature. Appearing “at a moment in women’s history when we were hungry to find a literature that was not just about growing up females, but also about ourselves as adults, as women connected to the world of children, work, and other women” (Pratt, 1997, p. 130), her works serve to pull from the shadows those who are marginalized, and represent the social and economic circumstances that make

creativity both possible and impossible for such subjects (Deluca, 2012).

B. *Previous Study of "I Stand Here Ironing"*

"I Stand Here Ironing" is a biographical story extracted from Olsen's own experience as a single mother, with her first daughter Clara as the prototype for Emily in the story. It is a feminist short story that scrutinizes mother-daughter relationship in a world where women have to work and children are not absorbed in an extended family (Pratt, 1997). In the story the mother must work under heavy financial pressure, and meanwhile she has to suffer from the guilt of abandoning and ignoring her little daughter. In parallel, Emily suffers from being abandoned by her mother and alienated by her counterparts. The story reveals the mother's grieving about Emily's life and about the circumstances that shape her own mothering. Emily's ever-increasing maturity is also vividly presented in the story.

Although most critics agree on the genuine artistic strengths of Olsen's "I Stand Here Ironing" and "Tell Me a Riddle", her name is often absent from the list of writers in contemporary studies. Most critics devote to the study of women image in all of Olsen's short stories and her silences in literature. Few critics study "I Stand Here Ironing" independently. Obviously, Olsen's identity as a Jewish working mother and her involvement in leftist political activities attract critics to interpret "I Stand Here Ironing" from a feminist perspective. Using the feminist concept of feminine mystique, Nur Fatin and Ida (2014) have studied women's position in the second wave feminist period, revealing that the female protagonist's barren emotions for men are due to her sense of obligations on completing the domestic demands, the expectations set by the patriarchal society and the judgmental eyes of the men in the patriarchal society. As a widowed and nameless woman, she is caught in a "moral dilemma" of whether to abandon Emily and pursue pleasure or to tend her daughter (Miles, 2008). Living in such a strictly patriarchal society, she has no other choice but to struggle to make money and bring Emily up.

Additionally, some critics pay attention to the personality of the female character Emily as well as her mother. For example, Li Jie (2007) discusses Emily's dual personality and explores the roles of mutual influences of nature and nurture in cultivating a person's character. He concludes that Emily's indifference and pessimism are attributed to the harsh reality of war, economic depression and immature nursing institute. However, the nature of pursuing truth and goodness motivates her to reconstruct her identity and become optimistic. Colton (2011) discusses the helpless mother image in this story and states that the mother struggles to raise her child much like any other parent in society and feels as though any problem her daughter faces is her fault. Although suffering both physically and spiritually, she attempts to be a good mother as much as she can.

These more or less historical researches intend to interpret the mother's and Emily's image independently by referring to the external factors. Few studies try to investigate the dynamic mother-daughter relationship by exploring the characters' inner world. How can this inexperienced but strong mother stand the pain of being abandoned and the guilt of abandoning her little daughter? How does the young Emily learn to protect her tender heart and grow to be strong and independent in a loveless family? What motivates the mitigation of the mother-daughter relationship? Psychoanalysis will lead us to the depth of the characters' minds and reveal their hidden unconscious, so that we can have a better understanding about the change of relationship between Emily and her mother. As a useful way of understanding human behavior, psychoanalysis can touch our most private being and reveal us to ourselves and to the world (Tyson, 1999). Through a close reading of the text, this paper will draw upon Freudian psychoanalytic theories, the defense mechanisms and tri-partition theory of id, ego and super-ego in particular in an attempt to shed light on the changing mother-daughter relationship.

II. DEFENSE MECHANISM ADOPTED BY EMILY AND HER MOTHER

Defense mechanisms are the methods by which the rational ego manages to be in harmony with the instinctual id and the moral super-ego. Tyson defines defenses as the processes by which the contents of our unconscious are kept in the unconscious" (1999, p.17), which means to keep the repressed repressed in order to avoid knowing we are incapable of handling some tricky situations. In this sense, defense mechanisms are tools that help people solve problems spiritually. This section will examine the defense mechanisms employed by Emily and her mother to protect themselves.

A. *Defense Mechanisms of Emily's Mother*

Emily's mother mainly resorts to two defense mechanisms to protect herself: displacement and denial. By using these defense mechanisms, she has alleviated the pressure of making money, the pain of being abandoned by her husband and the guilt of abandoning her daughter.

According to Tyson, displacement refers to diverting the repressed feelings to someone or something less threatening than the person who causes our fear, hurt, frustration, or anger (Tyson, 1999). In other words, people tend to unconsciously transfer their negative feelings to other person or object so that the repressed can be released. As an inexperienced young single mother, Emily's mother has to assume the responsibility of raising the baby alone when overwhelmed by the pain of being abandoned by her irresponsible husband. "She becomes burdened with emotional and financial issues." (Nur Fatin & Ida 2014, p.250) Unable to accept the wretched fact of being abandoned, the mother is in urgent need of releasing this repressed pain. Unconsciously, she diverts her repressed grief of being abandoned and the financial pressure of supporting her family to the poor Emily who is too young to threaten her. She sends Emily away to

the women downstairs, to her father's family, to the nursery school and to a convalescent home when Emily craves for her care. Although working at night and being free during the day, she insists on sending Emily away. Her husband deserts her and thus she abandons her little girl with the excuse of being busy making money. Unconsciously, she longs for experiencing the pleasure of abandoning others to alleviate her pain. This has successfully reduced her pain of being abandoned. Unfortunately, Emily becomes the victim of her mother's broken marriage.

Another defense mechanism adopted by Emily's mother is denial, which means "believing that the problem doesn't exist or the unpleasant incident never happened" (Tyson, 1999, p.18). Plagued by the guilt of abandoning Emily, the mother attempts to persuade herself to deny the existence of Emily's problem or deny her capability of solving the problem so as to avoid being troubled. When Emily's teacher invites her to talk about Emily's problem, she denies the fact that Emily is in need of her help. She said, "who needs help. Even if I came, what good would it do? You think because I am her mother I have a key, or that in some way you could use me as a key? She has lived for nineteen years. There is all that life that has happened outside of me, beyond me" (Olsen, 1961, p. 292). Obviously, Emily's mother denies Emily's urgent need of her help and her capability of offering help. She also denies her ability of developing Emily's gift of imitating when she is in a poor financial condition. By persuading herself that she plays no role in her daughter's life and that Emily is strong enough to handle life on her own, her conscience feels momentarily settled. The denial of problem comforts her and thus reduces her sense of guilt.

B. *Defense Mechanisms of Emily*

Having been abandoned for several times by her mother, Emily mainly adopts two defense mechanisms to protect herself from being hurt: acting out and avoidance.

Acting out as a defense mechanism refers to the direct expression of an unconscious wish or impulse in action, without conscious awareness of the emotion that drives that expressive behavior (Vaillant, 1992). Emily is abandoned by her mother as an eight-month baby with no awareness of herself as an independent being. Significantly, it is just at the critical looking-glass or mirror stage that Emily experiences the sense of lack. She suffers from hunger and also from the anxiety of being separated from her beloved mother. She immaturely turns to acting out to release her negative feeling. For instance, the first time when Emily is deserted at home alone or sent away, she continually begs to stay with her mother at night and pleads for her mother's help during nightmares. When the inexperienced mother refuses to feed Emily, Emily rebels by crying. She naively believes that that crying can persuade her mother to embrace her and stay together with her. She is too small to adopt other defense mechanisms except for crying. Crying rather than repressing her pain into the unconscious is an effective way to let out her negative feeling.

As she grows up, Emily gradually resorts to avoidance as a means of protecting herself, which means to "[stay] away from people or situations that are liable to make us anxious by stirring up some unconscious—i.e., repressed—experience or emotion" (Tyson, 1999, p.18). The defense mechanisms adopted by Emily help her reduce the anxiety of being ignored and frustration of being refused. When her mother relentlessly rejects her demands of not leaving her alone, she learns to be distant from her mother emotionally and physically, repressing her anxiety into the unconscious. When fetched back, she intentionally stays away from her mother and refuses to be touched. When her mother approaches her at the sound of her moan or restless stirring at night, she persuades her away with the words "I'm all right, go back to sleep, Mother" (Olsen, 1961, p. 294). Even in her innocent letter to her mother, she assumes the tone of an adult: "I am fine. How is the baby?" (Olsen, 1961, p. 294) By turning down her mother's offer for help, Emily declares her own confidence and independence (Jiang, 2009). In her tender heart, less expectation means less anxiety. Without expecting being helped, she can avoid the frustration of being refused. With the consuming desire repressed, she becomes less vulnerable to the external world. By staying away from her mother, her conscious has no opportunity to perceive the anxiety or pain, and thus she successfully avoids the torture of abandonment and refusal.

III. THE DYNAMIC MOTHER-DAUGHTER RELATIONSHIP

At the beginning, both Emily and her mother attempt to run away from the family with an aim to protect themselves and construct their individual identity. Their relationship becomes gradually distanced. However, with the establishment of the second family, they finally return to the family and the real world, and their relationship becomes harmonious step by step.

A. *Interpretation of the Mother's Escape and Return*

With the walking out of Emily's father, the family is shattered, and Emily's mother is caught in an identity crisis. In other words, the identity of a traditional wife in the patriarchal society is blurred and the sense of belonging is endangered. There is a great necessity for her to reconstruct her new identity. With the collapse of the male-centered family, she is exposed to a new opportunity of being an independent woman to pursue personal pleasure and success. However, with the patriarchal morality suffocating her, she cannot act as her husband does, but is obliged to carry out her household chores and responsibilities, removed from any romantic feelings (Nur Fatin & Ida, 2014). She has to assume the new role of a father and a mother at once to Emily. Her life is fragmentized by the trivial housework and her life has lost the center. Marginalized as woman, single mother, and working person, she is confused about her identity just as the readers are confused about the mother's name. Suffering the shifting of the three roles and failing to strike a

balance, she attempts to free herself from the constraints of her role as a mother. Consequently, she abandons Emily and works day and night. After escaping from the mother-daughter lock, she somehow enjoys being an independent working mother. Scrutinized by a society that upholds patriarchal values, however, Emily's mother occasionally feels guilty for her deeds (Nur Fatin & Ida, 2014). She fails to transcend the social conventions and her escape is doomed to failure.

Guilty of shaking off the traditional mother-daughter relationship, the mother strives to compensate for her indifference. It should be noted that the re-established family plays a decisive role in the turn of the relationship. When the mother gets remarried, the identity of wife resumes her sense of security and belonging. The husband naturally becomes the center of her life and thus she easily reassumes the responsibility of a mother and a wife. As a result, she fetches Emily back and attempts to reestablish intimacy. She sometimes tolerates Emily's bad habits to make up for her previous coldness and strictness. When Emily is reluctant to go to school, she "lets her be absent, though sometimes the illness was imaginary" (Olsen, 1961, p. 295). When Emily catches asthma and her breathing becomes more serious, the mother spares no efforts to make her happy and feel loved. It distinctively differs from her strictness about attendance with other children. The role of mother and wife makes her a qualified woman in the patriarchal society and the confusion about her identity is removed. However, shackled by the stereotyping of male society, Emily's mother, like any other woman, fails to construct an independent female identity and submissively devotes herself to the trivial household chores. Although she complains about the fragmentizing family life and about the failure to concentrate on her own things, she feels satisfied with her family life with several children and a husband surrounding her. Family pleasure compensates for the loss of her identity as an independent woman.

B. Interpretation of Emily's Escape and Return

Emily is abandoned by her mother as an eight-month-old baby. According to Lacan, she is exactly at the looking-glass or mirror stage, during which people come to recognize certain objects as being separate images from themselves (as cited in Bressler, 2003). When these objects are not present, we yearn for them. Such objects thus become symbols of lack, and this sense of lack will continue to plague us for the rest of our lives (as cited in Bressler, 2003). It is just at this critical stage that Emily is separated from her mother and sent to different places. She seldom sees smile on her mother's face and never feels her mother's love. At a time when every little girl is supposed to look a chubby blonde replica of Shirley Temple, Emily is thin and fails to have the golden and curly hair (Olsen, 1961, p. 295). Her growth apparently lags behind her contemporaries. She is often fretted by her foreign-looking appearance. In the convalescent school, despite her efforts in writing letters, she has never received a star for it and is considered as an over conscientious slow learner who keeps trying to catch up with others. When she secretly takes money from her mother's purse and buys candy for her beloved boy, she painfully finds that he loves another girl more. Failing to be a cared daughter, a good student, a beautiful and independent girl, Emily is desperately caught in an identity crisis. She is constantly tortured by the sense of lack and is too vulnerable and fragile to stand all these life pressures. She tries to alienate herself from people around since escape from this cold and loveless world can bring her momentary tranquility and peace.

Suffering both physically and emotionally, Emily gradually picks up the skill of protecting herself. Escape cannot solve the problem in essence. Instead of holding a negative attitude, Emily attempts to break the ice with her mother and take the initiatives to establish a more harmonious mother-daughter relationship. This is also an amazing opportunity to reconstruct her identity. The return to the new family and to the real world brings her a sense of safety and belonging. The mother's efforts to approach and spoil Emily help her confirm her identity as a cared daughter. When realizing her role as the elder sister, Emily quickly starts to help her mother tend the babies at morning crisis, combing hairs and preparing coats for her little siblings at the cost of "suffering over unpreparedness, stammering and unsure in her classes" (Olsen, 1961, p. 296). Such a busy life gives her no moment to feel frustrated or confused. Besides, she develops a hobby of imitating, which is an efficient way to release her frustration and pain. She imitates funny events in school to amuse her mother and performs in collages, at city and statewide affairs (Olsen, 1961, p. 297). Her performance is extensively recognized and praised, which brings her confidence and pleasure. She is no longer the unknown ordinary girl, but a humorous and popular girl bringing happiness to others. Through her efforts, she confirms her meaning of existence and reconstructs her identity as an individual female. Assuming the role of a cared daughter, a caring sister, and an excellent student with a special gift, the confusion about her identity is eliminated and the mother-daughter relationship becomes close and harmonious.

IV. CONCLUSION

"I Stand Here Ironing" is not simply a story recalled by a working woman, but instead a mother's monologue to her own experience of raising five children alone in the great depression. As Pratt (1997) states, it opens the door to new understandings of the inter-relationship between family and the world, between class and gender, and between mother and daughter. Actually, both Emily and her mother have suffered from the experience of being abandoned. The mother is abandoned by her husband, and Emily, as the victim of depression and her mother's unhappy marriage, also experiences in a bitter way the feeling of desertion at a very young age. In the turmoil of the Great Depression, the young mother regrettably fails to pay enough emotional attention to her daughter Emily who is at the exact age of craving love from mother. Both of them consciously or unconsciously employ defense mechanisms to protect their

injured ego. Their repressed pain and annoyance are to some degree effectively reduced. They try to escape from the real world to seek protection and their identity. As they grow, Emily and her mother both take the initiatives to harmonize the mother-daughter relationship. The mother reassumes the traditional female role and Emily grows into a similar female busy with housework and tending her siblings. Differently, Emily successfully constructs her independent identity as an imitator. Both Emily and her mother have experienced frustration, rejection, and ultimately, acceptance. Realizing that they cannot obtain assistance from others, Emily and her mother finally return to the hard realities of life and act within its limitations (Colston, 2011). Fortunately, their efforts are well rewarded and they finally not only get along well with each other but also live in harmony with themselves. They successfully avoid being troubled by the negative feeling of being abandoned and are no longer confused about their identity. This happy result may be attributed to the universal love between mother and daughter and the strong desire to survive which lies in the collective unconscious.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to thank those who gave me inspiration and who shared reference books with me.

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