

Assignment- I Stand Here Ironing

Goals: Gain a better understanding of voice in literature and how it is affected by point of view and circumstance.

Audience: Your classmates and I

Rationale: As teenagers decisions are often made for you by your parents, teachers and administration. While reading this piece we discovered as a class that Emily struggles through some of the same battles with authority and often because of her sex and poverty. Writing a letter from Emily's perspective allows you as readers to come to terms with the similarities and differences between Emily's struggles and your own and build a deeper understanding of how this text relates to the feminist movement and what Emily's mother meant when she compared her to a dress on the ironing board.

Our class has now finished reading Tillie Olsen's *I Stand Here Ironing*, but in case you forgot here are a brief review and a few important quotes I selected to jog your memory!

BOOK REVIEW:

Tillie Olsen's story "I Stand Here Ironing" recounts a poor working woman's ambivalence about her parenting skills and her eldest daughter's future. Published in Olsen's first collection of stories, *Tell Me a Riddle*, in 1961, this first-person story contains many autobiographical elements. Central to the plot is the metaphor of a mother ironing her daughter's dress as she mentally attempts to "iron" out her uneasy relationship with her daughter through a stream-of-consciousness monologue. The narrator, a middle-aged mother of five, as Olsen was when she wrote the story, is the type of woman whose story was seldom heard at that time: that of a working-class mother who must hold down a job and care for children at the same time. "Her father left me before she was a year old," the mother says, a circumstance that mirrored Olsen's predicament as a young mother. The story was heralded by the emerging women's movement of the early 1960s as an example of the difficulty of some women's lives and as a portrayal of the self-doubt many mothers suffer when they know their children are not receiving all the attention they deserve. Love or longing is not enough, Olsen says; everything must be weighed against forces that are beyond one's control. Though the story is not overtly political, it presents the type of economic condition that inspired Olsen to become active in left-wing labor causes at a young age. "I Stand Here Ironing," an unromantic portrait of motherhood, is perhaps the most frequently anthologized of Olsen's stories.

QUOTES:

"Let her be. So all that is in her will not bloom - but in how many does it? There is still enough left to live by. Only help her 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."

"She began to be asked to perform at other high schools, even colleges, than at city and

statewide affairs. The first one we went to, I only recognized her that first moment when thin, shy, she almost drowned herself into the curtains. Then: Was this Emily? The control, the command, the convulsing and deadly clowning, the spell, then the roaring, the stamping audience, unwilling to let this rare and precious laughter out of their lives.”

“She fretted about her appearance, thin and dark and foreign-looking at a time when every little girl was supposed to look or thought she should look a chubby blond replica of Shirley Temple.”

“School was a worry to her. She was not glib or quick in a world where glibness and quickness were easily confused with ability to learn. To her overworked and exasperated teachers she was an over conscientious "slow learner" who kept trying to catch up and was absent entirely too often.”

PROMPT:

Using your review, quotes, and memory of the story please write a letter to the counselor that comes to visit Emily’s mother from Emily’s perspective. Since the entire story is told from the mother’s point of view on Emily this is a rare opportunity for you to give Emily a voice and opinion on how she was raised, her economic status, schooling, ideals of feminine beauty, and what her future holds. You can pick any of the above mentioned topics for your letter or a topic of your own so long as you support your letter with the text. Feel free to use the character charts we created while reading or your discussion notes as a guide.

Requirements of letter format writing:

The first paragraph should introduce Emily and explain why she is writing the letter. Although it may be difficult, be sure to keep your tone and emotions similar to the character and piece we just read. Remember that Tillie wrote this story in stream-of-consciousness, would the daughter write a letter the same way? Why or why not? (be ready to defend your choice).

The next paragraph(s) should narrate the account of what happened, and why your appeal should be granted-what are you trying to prove about Emily that her mother may or may not have told the **counselor**? Consider why Emily’s mother was called in the first place, does she seem to think school is important? Include all the necessary facts and quotes from the story to legitimize Emily’s case. Don’t limit yourself to the text here; if you believe that Emily would have talked to different people or had different quotes use them!

The last part should summarize everything you have stated above. Repeat the necessary points that need to be elucidated. Also include the contact details and where you can be reached. Close out the letter by thanking the reader for their time.

Your letter should be 1-2 pages and after you are done you should write a short self-reflection paragraph 5-7 sentences talking about the choices you made as ‘Emily’ and why you made them-what did you learn about the story, character, and yourself by examining this new perspective for the stories motivations?

SAMPLE BELOW :

Return Address Line 1

Return Address Line 2

Date (Month Day, Year)

Dear Ms./Mrs./Mr. Last Name:

Body Paragraph 1

Body Paragraph 2

Body Paragraph 3

Closing (Sincerely...),

Signature

Your Name (Printed)