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Tillie Olsen, counter-revolutionary.

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TILLIE OLSEN, COUNTER-REVOLUTIONARY

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TILLIE OLSEN, COUNTERREVOLUTIONARY

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Literary historians have often referred to Tillie Olsen's background as a Communist. This is not surprising, since her writings are overtly political, and she contributed a great deal to the Communist Party of the United States of America (CPUSA) in her younger days through her literature as well as through other forms of activism. However, Olsen is actually a counterrevolutionary because as a feminist writer, her themes and style concern the emotional, individual, and even the spiritual. These features contradict the rational mode with dominated Communist Party leadership. Music, an important part of the Communist movement, also plays a significant role in many of Olsen's writings. Olsen uses this very emotional medium as yet another form of rebellion against the Party's analytical, rational ways. Olsen's use of music in the novel *Yonnondio* and in the short stories "O Yes" and "Tell Me a Riddle" represents a blatant rebellion against the Communist agenda. While a number of critics have noted ways in which Olsen defied Communist expectations with regard to literature, thus far, her revolt with music has been overlooked.

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Chapter One: The Communist Party, Women, and Emotions

Literary historians have often referred to Tillie Olsen's background as a Communist. This is not surprising, since her writings are overtly political, and she contributed a great deal to the Communist Party of the United States of America (CPUSA) in her younger days through her literature as well as through other forms of activism. However, Olsen is actually a counterrevolutionary because as a feminist writer, her themes and style concern the emotional, individual, and even the spiritual. These features contradict the rational mode with dominated Communist Party leadership. Music, an important part of the Communist movement, also plays a significant role in many of Olsen's writings. Olsen uses this very emotional medium as yet another form of rebellion against the Party's analytical, rational ways. Olsen's use of music in the novel *Yonnondio* and in the short stories "O Yes" and "Tell Me a Riddle" represents a blatant rebellion against the Communist agenda. While a number of critics have noted ways in which Olsen defied Communist expectations with regard to literature, thus far, her revolt with music has been overlooked.

The Communist Party

During the 1930's, when Tillie Olsen first became politically active, the CPUSA was at its apex of influence and power. However, the Party had not entered the era with a clean slate. The American Communist Party formed in 1919, splitting off from the left

wing of the Socialist Party. The Communists believed that Socialists had become too moderate because they sought socialism through legislation; Communists, on the other hand, embraced a Leninist approach. Historians Harvey Klehr and John Earl Haynes write, "In Lenin's revision of Marxism, revolution became not the product of inexorable social forces but the willful act of the revolutionary vanguard" (*American* 16). Thus, Communists would not wait to get the majority vote in order to form a new government; instead, they would seize power through revolution. In addition, Socialists believed that complete socialism would be reached only in the distant future, whereas Communists believed revolution would come in the immediate future. American Communist leaders, confident because of various successful revolutions occurring abroad, predicted that soon the "Soviet Republic of the world" would come into being (*American* 17). Yet, despite the initial excitement, the CPUSA had weaknesses that would affect the Party both before and after the 1930s.

The Party in America had problems with legality, unity and membership. The American Communist Party went underground the very same year it was formed, partially because of attacks from the Justice Department, but also because the members wished to follow the Russian model of revolution, which included clandestine activities (Klehr, *Heyday* 4). Going underground proved costly, as many members dropped out, not wishing to be associated with a controversial group. The group became officially legal in 1923, however, and eventually named itself the Communist Party USA, or CPUSA in 1929 (Klehr, *American* 37). After establishing its legality, the Party ran into other

problems that would interfere with its strength. The American Communists could not stay united from the beginning; even in 1919 two separate and hostile factions were formed. Various branches continued to develop throughout the years. In addition, the Party's membership suffered because the members were primarily foreign-born, non-English speakers (5).

Another problematic aspect was that no other American political party was so dependent on a foreign country. The success of the Communist revolution in the Soviet Union granted ultimate leadership and authority to Russian officials, although American Communists never truly understood the actual conditions in Russia. This dependence on the Soviet Union was awkward at times. As noted historians Harvey Klehr and John Earl Haynes write, "as the strongest capitalist nation on earth, America was, by definition, in conflict with a Soviet Union that saw itself as the harbinger of a future, noncapitalist world" (Klehr, *American* 3). Thus, there were many anti-Communist feelings in the United States, and the Party was seen as un-American.

The CPUSA's relations with the Soviet Union proved a weakness during the 1920s but became the Party's strength during the 1930s. The stock market plunge in 1929 provided a new opportunity for Communists. Klehr and Haynes describe the situation beginning the American Depression. Within a few months unemployment increased more than tenfold:

> [Whole industries, such] as automobile and textile manufacturing, were devastated and, with them, entire communities. By October 1931 more than 9 million people

> were out of work. The banking system came to the edge of collapse in 1932. Agricultural prices, hardly robust in the 1920s, plummeted further, threatening farmers with ruin. (60)

As a result of the economic collapse, Americans were fearful, and a great number were receptive to new political ideas. Many were willing to entertain the possibility of a new, non-capitalist system.

It was in 1931, during all of the economic upheaval, that eighteen-year-old Tillie Lerner joined the Young Communist League (YCL) (Coiner 145). Lerner's parents had been active Socialists, teaching her political commitment by example. Because Lerner's father was the state secretary for the Nebraska Socialist Party, the parents often hosted influential Socialist leaders in their home. When Lerner joined the YCL, she wrote political skits and musicals. Lerner was active for eighteen months, forming relationships with comrades by working in a tie factory. In 1932 she was jailed for passing out leaflets at a packinghouse in Kansas City. At this time she was already sick from pleurisy, and the inadequate medical care in jail caused her to contract tuberculosis. She was released from jail so that she could be nursed back to health. Olsen later told scholar Constance Coiner that the sickness was a blessing because, while bedridden, she wrote "Iron Throat," a short story later to be part of the novel *Yonnondio* (145). *Partisan Review*, a bi-monthly revolutionary magazine which had published her poem "I Want You Women Up North to Know" and would later publish the poems "Thousand Dollar Vagrant" and "The Strike," published her short story "Iron Throat" in the April-May 1934 issue. The story had such

literary promise that both Macmillan and Random House wanted her to sign a contract. Olsen signed a contract with Random House and moved to Los Angeles to write. She left her two-year-old daughter to live with her parents. However, Lerner was unhappy away from her child and also unhappy in the Hollywood Left Circles, which consisted mostly of celebrities and artists instead of working-class people. She often traveled to nearby communities to help organize farm workers. In 1936 she gave up her writing contract with Random House, went home, got her daughter, and moved to San Francisco. Here she lived with and subsequently married Jack Olsen, a YCL comrade, and together they continued their political work. Coiner writes that Olsen participated in a myriad of activities, including "Party meetings, union organizing, picket lines, demonstrations, [and] leafleting" (149). She also spent a great deal of time writing for various political causes. Olsen remained active in the Communist Party during the '40's and faced harassment at the end of the decade because of her dedication to a political party which was feared by most citizens of the United States. Olsen left the Communist Party around 1948, but the persecution from anti-Communists still continued. For example, one evening in 1952 she turned on the radio to hear that "Tillie Olsen . . . [was] a paid agent of Moscow [trying] to take over the San Francisco Public School System by tunneling in the PTA" (150). Because of this broadcast, some of Olsen's closest friends ostracized her. In addition, Olsen and her husband were subpoenaed by the House Committee on UnAmerican Activities, and the FBI frequently contacted their employers, causing them each to lose a series of jobs.

Olsen's Grievances with the CPUSA

Olsen finally left the CPUSA because of a conflict in priorities: Olsen prioritized individual rights above Party discipline. For the CPUSA, the problems of gender (women's rights), individual feelings, and individual struggles would all be solved through economic revolution. As a result, the personal needs of Party members were often ignored.

The CPUSA offered more opportunities for women than the dominant culture, and it fostered Olsen's writing. Nevertheless, Coiner writes that "Party members— especially male Communists— often ignored, trivialized, or repressed the domestic, personal, and emotional dimensions of [women's] lives" (159). According to Coiner, "Proletarian" and "manly" were synonymous within the CPUSA during this period (44). Elsa Jane Dixler writes that Party leaders were mostly male, and any female leaders were ignorant of the problems of most women. Coiner quotes Olsen as saying that "'those things having to do with . . . the maintenance of life and the bearing and rearing of the young'" received little attention from the Party (qtd. in *Better Red* 159). Women could participate in politics alongside men, but, according to Dixler:

> there was no question that it was Mama who cooked breakfast before everyone went out to march. Women were to fight for socialism because it would free them from the double burden of economic and domestic exploitation— just as soon as they had finished the supper dishes and put the baby to bed. (Dixler 85)

Neglect of individual emotional dimensions within the party was not just limited to women's rights. According to many scholars and past members, the CPUSA lacked empathy for anything regarding the personal lives of the members. According to Coiner, Olsen agrees with what former Party member Peggy Dennis wrote in her autobiography, that "'as to the personal problem each of us had, none of us was equipped by our Party experience to respond to each other on a simple human level'" (qtd. in *Better Red* 157). Coiner also quotes former Party member Vivian Gornick in saying that while the Party's "'gift for political emotion [was] highly developed, [its] gift for individual empathy [was] neglected, atrophied'" (157). The Party valued group intellect over individual emotions. As Coiner concludes, Party members feared and trivialized emotional needs (56), and were skeptical of psychological subjects, which included Olsen's interest in the "the shaping of human beings" (182). As Dixler asserts, this apprehension existed because nothing was to be put above the political (*The Woman Question* 65).

In *The Moulding of Communists* former Party member Frank S. Meyer emphasizes the way that the Party shunned displays of emotion. He writes that the ideal Communist was "a man in whom all individual, emotional, and unconscious elements [had] been reduced to a minimum and subjected to the control of an iron will, informed by a supple intellect" (16). According to Meyer, Communist theory taught that "energy [was] not to be frittered away on emotionalities" (74). All emotional energy was to be channeled in aiding the mission of the party, but in a sober, harnessed way. No one emotion was to overpower others, and members were to remain calm and unaggressive. Meyer writes that

the goal was to be a perfect Communist, or "Bolshevik," and that "the degree that individual psychological traits remain[ed]" determined whether or not the Party member reached perfection (12). According to Meyer, Communists felt that inner, emotional struggles would be solved as the society improved. Members who chose to explore their inner life were losing their way (18), because anything that went beyond manipulation of society was meaningless.

The Communist Party was materialist, most concerned with science and facts, and dismissed many intangibles such as emotionality or spirituality as unimportant or nonexistent. For Communists, social interactions and history had the predictability of Newtonian physical interactions and properties (Meyer 38). Because of this supposed predictability, Communists believed that man's foremost responsibility was to be in control of human activity because it was manipulable. After all, "'science' . . . implies not knowledge for the sake of knowing but knowledge for control" (Meyer 38). The materialist view of the Communist Party insisted that the universe was mappable and limited, and as a Marxist-Leninist would say, that there was nothing unknowable, only "'that which [was] not yet known'" (qtd. in Meyer 53). Meyer admits that because of the materialist outlook, whole realms that could not be materially substantiated were dismissed as meaningless. He writes that the "richest areas of human experience, the ideal and the spiritual" were unimportant (53). Thus, Communist ideology excluded individuality, emotionality and spirituality. This analytical viewpoint became destructive for those members of the Party who did not share the same perspective.

A Different Perspective

Carol Gilligan's study, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*, explores gender differences in moral development. Through her study she asserts that most often there are distinct differences between the way males and females think and communicate. Traditional psychological research bothered Gilligan because it was male-biased. Whenever women were measured against any psychological standard, they were considered lacking. For example, she notes that in Lawrence Kholberg's six stages of moral development, the highest stage is based upon universal principles of justice (Gilligan 18). Gilligan found that women are deficient when measured by Kholberg's scale because they often only reach the third stage of development wherein "morality is conceived in interpersonal terms and goodness is equated with helping and pleasing others" (18). Kholberg implies that women will not "recognize the inadequacy of this moral perspective" unless they enter the male world of work and competition (Gilligan 18). Then, the higher stages, where relationships are subordinated to rules, might be reached. Gilligan writes that this view is paradoxical, because the very traits that "have defined the 'goodness' of women, their care for and sensitivity to the needs of others, are those that mark them as deficient in moral development" (18).

In her study, Gilligan concludes that whereas the male voice usually speaks of equality, justice and rights, the female voice speaks of peace, care and response. She reconsiders a study with two eleven-year-olds, Jake and Amy. When given a dilemma involving a man named Heinz who needs a drug for his dying wife, but has no money to

buy it, the two children reveal a definite difference in thinking. Jake answers that the drug must be stolen because logically, a human life is worth more than any drug. He says that Heinz would be arrested, but that the judge would conclude that stealing the drug was the right thing to do. In contrast, Amy answers that Heinz should not steal the drug because it is not right. She feels that there must be some other way to get the drug, like borrowing money, or "if Heinz and the druggist had talked it out long enough, they could reach something besides stealing" (Gilligan 29). Amy states that stealing the drug would be bad because then Heinz might go to jail, and no one would be left to take care of his wife. The two resolve the dilemma in differing ways, "he impersonally through systems of logic and law, she personally through communication in relationship" (29).

Elaborating on Gilligan's ideas, Elisabeth Aries writes that male communication has always been the standard by which female communication was judged. Psychologists saw women's conversation as gossip, and found signs of uncertainty within women's language. However, when not using the male standard, "the talk of women friends was reinterpreted to be an 'on-going mosaic of noncritical listening, mutual support, enhancement of self-worth, relationship exclusiveness, and personal growth and self-discovery'"(qtd. in Aries 205). Although the male standard suggests otherwise, the dominant female voice, one of interpersonal care and personal discovery, is not lacking, it is just different. Mary Anne Fitzpatrick and Anthony Mulac also compared the difference between male and female conversation when asked to relate dramatic life experiences. Fitzpatrick and Mulac conclude: "men made more references to destructive actions,

space, time, and quantity, whereas women made more reference to feelings, emotions, motivations, and the self" (Fitzpatrick 217).

Thus, overall, females give preference to personal details instead of material facts. Females are also very often concerned with emotional needs when males are concerned with entitled rights. Obviously a balance of both the female and male traits would be ideal, but the Communist Party operated with a one-sided mentality. Olsen admits that this was her main grievance with the Party: "'I was most troubled by [the lack of] feeling. . . [and] consideration for people, and I didn't want to be around that'" (qtd. in *Better Red* 158). The poignancy of Olsen's grievances with the Party is especially apparent when looking at her writing. Her themes and style prioritize the personal— namely the emotional, psychological and spiritual. These personal aspects are very feminine concerns, and Olsen chooses to communicate in feminine ways rather than through the intellectual male style. Her use of this voice, which promotes the nurturing of the self and others, resists the male standards placed upon Communist art.

The Communist Party's Literary Credo

Communists learned to use art differently from other political groups. In *Great Day Coming*, R. Serge Denisoff writes about Lenin's fundamental ideology that "consciousness determines being" (10). Lenin felt that the populace needed to be educated about the Communist political standpoint in every way. He suggested that "'it is not sufficient to explain the political oppression of the workers. . . . It is necessary to

agitate in connection with every concrete manifestation of such oppression'" (qtd. in Denisoff 10). Thus, Communists were to use "art, literature, posters, proverbs, [and] music" in addition to their pamphlets and speeches as propaganda (10). In Russia, Bolsheviks found inspiration in folk songs, fairy tales, proverbs and adages; American Communists were encouraged to follow this model. The CPUSA needed to form a position regarding art for America.

Many arguments existed within the American Left as to how various artistic forms should be used. Most Communists believed that art was worthless unless it attempted to change society, yet Communists were sharply divided as to what type of literature would be most effective in bringing about change. Some believed that writers must reject anything bourgeois and begin again, developing new "unborrowed" forms for literature (Coiner 16). Others followed Leon Trotsky's ideas as presented in *Literature and Revolution.* He argued that a new culture could not be formed, and that bourgeois art could not be ignored. Instead, he believed that the proletarian artists must draw from the worthy aspects of bourgeois art and develop them (192).

CPUSA literary circles placed certain expectations on the Party's writers. Constance Coiner comments that Party members were often skeptical of those with literary skills, who were either considered "fickle and unstable" or "putative defectors and sentimental moralizers"(Coiner 22). Coiner relates the experience of A.B. Magil, a Party member and writer. He found that Party members disrespected artists, and that they did not feel literature to be as important as other political efforts. Coiner quotes him as

saying: "'I had come to feel that the leaders of the Party had no respect for cultural activity or cultural expression, and it was a handicap to be known as a poet or a fiction writer or anything of that sort'" (qtd. in *Better Red* 22). Magil knew that if he wanted to be a "professional revolutionary" he must be a reporter instead of a poet. The reason for Communist anxiety about the creative and abstract stemmed from the Party's neglect of the personal. Clearly, a creative writer often uses the emotional, spiritual and individual vision.

In order to define Communist ideals regarding literature, prominent Communist literary critic Michael Gold published guidelines in the September 1930 issue of *New Masses*. These guidelines, not surprisingly, are more journalistic than creative. He asserted that the proletarian writer must describe the work of machinists, sailors, farmers and weavers with "technical precision" (Gold 3). He wanted tangible, scientific details the workers experienced rather than abstract, emotional experiences. Gold insisted that literature must not deal with "sickly mental states," and that authors should not be "verbal acrobats" or "literary show-offs"— writing should be simple and to the point (Gold 4). He wrote that proletarian realism "knows exactly what it believes and where it is going" (5); in other words, it was meant for revolution and would achieve revolution. Thus, a good proletarian novel would end with political triumph. Deborah Rosenfelt notes that in the 1930s the proletarian novel fit into one of four types: "the strike novel, the novel of conversion to Communism, the bottom dog novel, and the novel documenting the decay of the middle class" (73). According to Rosenfelt, political explicitness alone was enough

to win praise in the circles of the literary Left. In 1933 *The Great Tradition* was published by Granville Hicks, another authority on proletarian literature; in it Hicks attacked writers since the Civil War for not being "'adequately conscious of the class struggle'" (qtd in Coiner 26). Coiner writes of the book:

> The *Great Tradition* measures writers in terms of their understanding of socioeconomic forces and class struggle; moreover, their point of view must be sufficiently sympathetic to the working class and optimistic about possibilities for revolutionary change. The study barely addresses the subject of literary form. (26)

Not surprisingly, due to the male dominance of the literary Left, Communist literary circles rarely looked seriously at the writing of women. Granville Hicks described authors Edith Wharton, Willa Cather, and Ellen Glasgow as "'lacking the courage to strike out in the world of strife'" (qtd. in Coiner 36). He compared them to male authors with similar talents but insisted that the women failed even more than the men— they were just "'victims of timidity'" (36). In 1928, party member Genevieve Taggard called the journals of Katherine Mansfield "'neat little feminine cajolery. . . helpless, forlorn, honest, childlike, lost. . .'" (Dixler 45). Women who were successful in Communist literary circles adopted "manly" courage. Coiner quotes Clara Weatherwax, who wrote *Marching! Marching!*, which won an award for being the best proletarian novel during the year 1934-1935. The novel "refers to 'College talkers swashbuckling up to large ideas' who are 'not men enough to take their pants down healthily to a working world'" (36). According to poet Meridel Le Sueur, the Party "'tried to beat the lyrical and emotional out of women'"

(qtd. in Coiner 37). This is ironic when considering that the party utilized music in their struggle.

The Communists' Use of Music

Ironically, the Communist Party chose to use music, often a very lyrical and emotional medium, in their struggle for revolution. Music was indeed a major part of the culture in the Communist movement, and the Party encouraged the use of music *if* its function was to unite the people for revolution. Robbie Lieberman writes that Party members sang Russian revolutionary ballads in left-wing adult camps, and used music on the picket lines and in the homes (28). The CPUSA recognized that music had a "direct and reciprocal relation to social, economic, and political issues" (Denisoff 26), and as with other forms of art, attempted to use it as a political weapon. Music was to persuade and unite the people. The foreword in the *Worker's Songbook* (1934) proclaimed:

> Music Penetrates Everywhere
>
> It Carries Words With It
>
> It Fixes Them In the Mind
>
> It Graves Them In the Heart
>
> Music is a Weapon in the Class Struggle (Lieberman 28)

Of course, the reason that music "penetrates everywhere" is because, like any form of art, it affects the listener *emotionally* as well as intellectually. Anthony Storr writes that hearing, more than seeing, is "deeply associated with emotion and with our relationship

with our fellow human beings" (*Music* 26). He asserts that this connection exists because the first experience of hearing takes place in the womb before the possibility of sight. Sounds can arouse or calm emotions. The emotion inherent in music can not be denied. Malcolm Budd writes that the musician transforms "emotions into musical sounds which . . . are transformed back into emotions that the sympathetic listener experiences as he hears the music" (Budd 122). Emotions are individual experiences. No two people will be affected by the same music in identical ways; individual experiences, morals, beliefs and dreams will always determine interpretation. However, to Communist leaders, individual feelings were considered bourgeois and petty. Lenin's idea that music must "'unite the feeling and thought'" of the listeners (qtd. in Denisoff 12) overshadows the fact that each person is a separate psychological and intellectual entity. The power of music to strengthen a group can not be argued, but music always touches the individual first

The themes and style in Olsen's writing prioritize the personal. Olsen wrote to give significance to her feminine attitude, which rebelled against the Communist agenda. Olsen's use of music in the novel *Yonnondio* and the short stories "O Yes" and "Tell Me a Riddle" strengthens this rebellion. Music in Olsen's writing contains an equivocal power, sometimes to help create community but sometimes to destroy it. Most important, the music liberates the individuality of characters. Olsen's music builds the individual soul, and in this way Olsen goes against the contemporary Communist Party that most highly valued group political action and the engagement of the intellect rather than "bourgeois individualist feelings." In doing so, Olsen has been a true counterrevolutionary.

Chapter Two: The Many Ways in which Tillie Olsen Rebels

In various ways Tillie Olsen met the requirements and assigned duties of a "proletarian writer" with her fiction. Yet in other ways she acted as a counterrevolutionary. In terms of the Communist Party, Olsen might be one of the "literary show-offs" or "verbal-acrobats" that critic Michael Gold insisted destroy literature because her use of language and style is beyond the norm (Gold 3). Olsen definitely does not meet Gold's criterion that writers must describe the worker's tasks with technical, not emotional precision. She also describes the type of "sickly mental states" that were unacceptable to the Communist literary circle. This chapter presents the various ways that critics have seen Olsen as an innovator and a rebel against the strictures of the contemporary Communist Party, and also against the broader societal strictures of her time.

A Bakhtinian, Feminist Language and Style

Because Olsen wrote of the socioeconomically oppressed, and she herself was oppressed because of gender, Olsen's writing resists authority. In *The Dialogic Imagination*, Mikhail Bakhtin asserts that the novel is an unstable, undefinable, historical genre. What Bakhtin writes of the novel can also be said of Olsen's writing: "[that it] is associated with the eternally living element of unofficial language and unofficial thought" (Bakhtin 20). Bakhtin's theory contradicts Michael Gold's criterion for the proletarian writer because no strictures can be placed upon the "unofficial"; the "unofficial"

welcomes almost all forms of writing and represents voices of numerous classes, customs and ideologies. Although many critics have pointed out the patriarchal bias in Bakhtin's writing, feminist scholars have been able to profitably apply much of Bakhtin's theory to feminist criticism (Vice 3). Bakhtin asserts that there are many languages representing different classes, cultures, communities and ideologies. Although Bakhtin omits gender differences, gender clearly represents another strata of society.

A number of critics have recognized Olsen's counterrevolutionary use of language and style. Joanne S. Frye comments, "Through her mother tongue, through her innovations in form, Olsen uses words in [a] transformative way, finding the capacity to speak the unspeakable" (123). Frye writes that Olsen is faced with the dilemma of expressing women's feelings through the language of men. "Women's lives [and most working people] have no available language" (11), she contends, because those most powerful in society (higher class men) have determined assumptions and expectations about language. Another critic, Nancy Huse, writes that because of this oppression, Olsen must "try the accepted form, . . .discard the unfit, . . . [and] create others which are more fitting" (Huse 29). This sounds much like Leon Trotsky's theory in the *Literature and Revolution*— that in order to create a proletarian culture one must use the bourgeois cultural forms and cleanse and develop them (*Better Red* 16).

Olsen's style is traditional in that she uses the universal, patriarchal language passed down from generations, yet she is revolutionary as she arranges words, sentences and chapters in order to create her individual, feminine feelings. Olsen discards strictures

placed on sentence form, which produces blunt emotion. For example, in the beginning of *Yonnondio*, the Holbrooks live in a coal mining town, where there is constant threat of men dying in the shaft. Jim and Anna plan to leave the town in the spring, but one day, while the children are playing, the warning whistle sounds. The children run to the mine head: "The women were there already. Tearless faces, watching. But no one brought up limp and sagging. Instead, frightened men, and the rest sealed in an open grave. A big explosion. It might take days to dig them up" (20). Olsen writes down the fragmented thoughts of the children and women present, making new sentences to emphasize small but powerful details: "Tearless faces, watching. But no one brought up limp and sagging." The incompleteness of the sentences causes the reader to slowly experience the shocked and empty feeling of the characters' experiences.

Joanne Trautman Banks writes that Olsen "uses empty space as if it were as important an element as language. Many of her sentences are fragments, italicized, parenthetical" (158). This technique often allows for breaks and pauses so that one character's point of view is never focused on for long. For example, in *Yonnondio* there is a scene where the mother Anna miscarries after being battered by her husband. Parenthetical interruptions occur throughout the paragraphs, which allow the reader to know the emotions of a variety of characters. Mazie, frightened from the occurrence, flees: "And Mazie runs (*on the kitchen floor the blood*) runs, runs outside" (*Yonnondio* 77). The doctor summoned to help has his own reaction: "'So you had intercourse before, it wasn't only the fall.' (Pigsty, the way these people live.) 'And she's been nursing all

along? We'll have a look at the baby.' (Rickets, thrush, dehydrated; don't blame it trying to die)" (77). Throughout Olsen's text, instances occur where the parenthetical is used to emphasize another character's thoughts or the details given by an omniscient narrator.

These different ways of expression —parenthetical, fragmented or italicized sentences— add emotional experience to the text because many voices and details combine to surround the reader with the traumatic feelings of the situation. This allows for the innovative narration that Bakhtin would term "polyphony." A work is polyphonic when the characters' and narrator's voices are given equal utterance, regardless of social and cultural differences (Vice 112). For example, in the passage from *Yonnondio* at the mining head, the women and children are both represented through the narration. Again, in the passage when Anna miscarries, the narration gives voice to the doctor and Mazie. Olsen's writing indeed contains a "polyphony" of language and culture. Linda Park-Fuller uses *Yonnondio* to illustrate Olsen's use of polyphony. She notices that there are at least three levels of voices contained in the novel's internal discourse: "1) the stratification of the narrator's voice into two distinct voices, 2) undramatized voices and linguistic ideological communities embedded in the narrative voice, and 3) voices of characters, including undramatized voices and communities embedded in character discourse" (2).

Park-Fuller writes that the narrator of *Yonnondio* has a literary voice and an oral voice, and often breaks from one to the other without transition. The oral voice can speak directly to the characters or directly to the reader, as it does in this passage of *Yonnondio*:

Perhaps it frightens you as you walk by, the travail of the trees against the dark

> crouched house, the weak tipsy light in the window, the man sitting on the porch, menacing weariness riding his flesh like despair. And you hurry along, afraid of the black forsaken streets, the crooked streets, and look no more. (72)

Here, the narrative voice breaks from third person narrative and addresses the reader personally. This intimate attention pulls the reader in, making him or her a direct participant as he or she imagines or remembers a similar experience of an encounter with poverty.

To demonstrate the unobjectified and undramatized voices that occur in the narrative voice throughout *Yonnondio*, Park-Fuller mentions the sequence describing Jim Tracy, a man who quits his job digging sewers with hopes of finding a better one. The narrator begins with Jim Holbrook's angry reaction to what the young man has done, but then continues addressing Tracy. The narrator gives voice to those who believe "ifyoureallywanttoworkyoucanalwaysfindajob" (62), and also gives voice to the companies not hiring: 'nojobnojob nothingdoingtoday' (63). Fuller writes, "As Bakhtin notes, speaking persons in a novel need not necessarily be incarnated in character" (7). As Olsen gives voice to these individuals, the reader is faced with the despair that Tracy must feel as he sees that he will never get a better job. The interconnected words place emphasis on the whirlwind of stress faced by those who can not find work.

Finally, Park-Fuller shows how polyphony is used within the characters' dialogue. She writes of one passage in which Anna and Jim are getting ready for the day. Other voices, namely the voices of the Kvaternicks, are given utterance through Jim and Anna's

conversation. For example, Anna says of Marie Kvaternick, "she keeps talking about the old country, the field and what they thought it would be like here . . . and she talks about the coal. Says it oughta be red, and let people see how they get it with blood" (2). Through these words the reader is introduced to the despair of immigrants who thought they might come to a better land. Within the conversation of Anna and Jim lies another voice waiting to be heard. Fuller concludes:

> Through the uses of literary and oral narrator voices; embedded discourse of dramatized characters and undramatized voices; parody and distortion of alien ideology; implication of diverse sociolinguistic communities; reported speech, appropriated words, dialects, speech styles, popular media, and folk genres; Olsen weaves a composition as rich and as delicate as a fugue. (9)

The aspects of Olsen's language and style have voices of their own that contain confusions and contradictions, which, when integrated, combine to represent humanity.

Constance Coiner analyzes the short stories in *Tell Me a Riddle* with a Bakhtinian approach as well. She uses Bakhtin's theory of "heteroglossia," which is his "'key term for describing the complex stratification of language in genre, register, sociolect, dialect, and the mutual animation of these forms'" (qtd. in Vice 18). Coiner writes that the stories in *Tell Me a Riddle* present a "wide range of individual, marginalized voices competing for our attention" ("No One's" 259). The competing voices produce a "carnival" effect, called so by Bakhtin because, as Coiner says, in his time the carnival was a site where many of the "usual societal impositions of class and order [were] suspended while the

populace participate[d] in multiple ways of parodying or mimicking the dominant culture's behavior" ("No One's" 258). For Bakhtin, the novel is a manifestation of this carnival. The multivocal form in *Tell Me a Riddle* causes the reader to be a direct participant. The reader must make connections between the various voices, and in this way Olsen rejects traditional modes of authorial control (259).

Coiner uses a situation in "Tell Me a Riddle" to exemplify the reader's active participation. She refers to the end of the story when Eva is in bed, constantly speaking seemingly incoherent phrases, mostly about revolution and humanity. At one point she whimpers, "*No man one except through others/ strong with the not yet in the now/ Dogma dead war dead one country*" (109). For her husband, "she was playing back only what said nothing of him, of the children, of their intimate life together" ("Tell Me a Riddle" 109). To Eva's husband the words are just babbling. His point of view forces the reader to make a decision: Eva's words could be considered babbling, or they could have meaning. This surrender of authorial control becomes Olsen's most effective method for bringing out the revolutionary themes in her work, because the reader must decide what connection the voices make for him/herself. This freedom of response which Olsen creates might allow the reader to draw conclusions which challenge Communist views.

A "Socialist Feminist"

In addition to employing innovative techniques, Olsen chooses nontraditional themes as compared with other writers in the Communist Party and non-Communist

writers of the same time period. Olsen writes for the working class, which would meet the Communist Party's approval; however, she does not limit her subject matter to class issues alone. Deborah Rosenfelt calls Olsen a "socialist feminist." She writes that Olsen is part of:

> a line of women writers, associated with the American Left, who unite class consciousness and a feminist consciousness in their lives and creative work . . . who articulate the experiences and grievances of women and of other oppressed groups— workers, national minorities, the colonized and the exploited— and who speak out of a defining commitment to social change. (56)

Her stories depict the injustices associated with poverty, racism and patriarchal order. Rosenfelt groups Olsen with writers such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Josephine Herbst, and Alice Walker who, regardless of political affiliations or eras, raise consistent questions about how to survive economically and how to "understand the connections and contradictions between women's struggles and those struggles based on other categories or issues" (57). In the 1930s Olsen wrote for the working class and women when oppression was overwhelming because of the Depression. Olsen chronicled these current struggles that were currently being faced through the story of the Holbrook Family. Scott Turow writes:

> In all quarters theirs is a life of unvarnished misery, of poverty, illness, demeaning labor, of cramped desire, and of an existence so absorbed in the small mechanics of survival that any sense of greater human purpose lies obliterated, obscured, a

distant aching, a knowledge too remote to be recognized or named. (114)

Similarly, all the stories in *Tell Me a Riddle*, and the short story "Requa I" deal with struggles of working class characters.

Olsen became a strong feminist voice in the 1950s when the women's movement was overshadowed by the Civil Rights movement, but race was still an important issue in her writing. In "O Yes" (1956) Olsen explores social reasons for racism by showing how a young white girl, Carol, realizes that something divides her from her black friend, Parry. The division is forced upon them by adults. As the girls enter junior high, they are divided because of the expectations of peers and teachers. Parry becomes a "jive" talker and begins to do poorly in school, while Carol is successful and grouped with other successful white friends. Nora Ruth Roberts makes the pertinent argument that "Olsen avoids the unrealistic cant of Communist rhetoric. . ., which minimizes the effects of race prejudice on the working class" (109). Roberts writes that the standard slogan was 'Black and white, unite and fight', and that Communist leaders insisted that the races, being of the same class, could unite for revolution (109). In "O Yes" Olsen challenges this idea and shows that uniting races was more complicated than just uniting in a class struggle. Olsen also has an awareness of other ethnicities besides African Americans in her writing; in fact, most of her characters are usually first or second generation Russian immigrants. Olsen indeed writes for the marginalized and oppressed, but her solutions ask not for societal change, but individual change— she knows that society can not change unless individuals do first. Of course, for Communist leaders, any problem could be solved if

only the society would change first.

Olsen has been especially revolutionary as a feminist writer, protesting the societal oppression of women. Olsen's brand of feminism contradicts contemporary feminists because she emphasizes the legitimate role of mother and homemaker in society; however, she also shows the potential pitfalls (loss of identity and self worth) sometimes involved with this responsibility. Her writings of the 30s and 50s are all feminist, opposing contemporary restrictions on women and asserting their worth as nurturers. Rosenfelt calls *Yonnondio* a battleground between men and women, as Olsen shows Anna's unrecognized and unrewarded but extremely important role in her family (85). Anna is victimized by her husband because she only bears the children, and does the housework; her husband is ungrateful and belittles Anna's position through emotional and physical abuse. Olsen makes clear that Anna's work is just as, if not more, essential as Jim's in the survival of the family (85). Rosenfelt writes, "There is nothing redeeming about the brutal and exploitive labor at the plant; Anna at least is engaged in production of goods the family will use and in caring for children whom she loves through her exhaustion" (85). A similar battle occurs in "Tell Me a Riddle" with Eva and her husband as she struggles to find self worth in a system exploiting women. Ellen Cronan Rose writes of the scene when Eva could not tell a riddle to her grandchild, but her husband could: he "knew how to tickle, chuck, lift, toss, do tricks, tell secrets, make jokes, match riddle for riddle" ("Tell Me a Riddle" 85). The reason the grandfather could do these things is because he "never scraped a carrot or knew a dish towel sops" (66). Thus, Rose argues, Olsen portrays the

"feminine reality" that often, "the man is free, the woman bound. Women cannot 'riddle' or form the experience they are utterly immersed in" (123). Olsen's adult female characters are immersed with the care of their family, but she recognizes the value inherent in this role.

Given her own struggles as a mother of four children, it is not surprising that mothers and children are central to almost all of Olsen's work, which is yet another way in which she defies the patriarchal bias of the Communist Party. Bonnie Lyons comments, "The child embraces man's potential greatness and his needy vulnerability" (97). Olsen refers to two children in *Yonnondio* as examples of opposing human possibilities. Erina, a character who lives near the city dump, is epileptic and crippled, an image of human suffering, while the baby Bess, who uses her powers to hit a jar lid on the table, is the image of human possibility. Lyons writes that Olsen's stories suggest that children who have been hurt and withdrawn can be reclaimed through love. She mentions the boy in "Requa I," who has been emotionally scarred by the death of his mother. After much emotional and psychological damage, he begins to improve because of the love of his uncle. Other children, Emily in "I Stand Here Ironing," and Mazie and her siblings in *Yonnondio,* have had pain in their lives, and their potential lies in the love that their parents might be able to offer. Lyons also asserts that "the degree to which adults can mother and nurture children is frequently a sign of their own psychic condition" (97). Anna in *Yonnondio* can not nurture her children while she is in deep depression. The mother in "I Stand Here Ironing" has insecurities as a single mother that affect her

encouragement of her daughter Emily. Joanne S. Frye writes that Olsen shows us "motherhood bared, stripped of romantic distortion, and reinfused with the power of genuine metaphorical insight into the problems of selfhood in the modern world" (128). She writes that Olsen presents the limitations mothers face when attempting to foster the child's growth of selfhood (130). Frye refers to "I Stand Here Ironing" because the mother in this story has reached a point at which she knows she can not help her daughter any more. A similar instance occurs in "O Yes," when Carol's mother can not explain the effects of the African American church congregation's music. Olsen brings out the moral and emotional aspect of mothering (Lyons 99). Clearly this concentration on mothers and children is a direct confrontation of Communist Party doctrine, which stated that families should be secondary to politics.

In yet another bold move for her time, Olsen illustrates an innovative connection between the physical body and the emotional and spiritual. Mental and emotional states were considered a "'Bohemian,' bourgeois concern" by the Communist Party leadership *(Better Red* 182). Communist theories were scientifically based (*The American Communist Movement* 35), and in the past scientific data did not link the physical and emotional. However, Olsen obviously believed differently. Banks describes Eva in "Tell Me a Riddle" as someone who changes emotionally and spiritually because of her physical illness. Whereas Eva's whole life used to be focused on the needs of others, in the end she must focus on her own emotional and spiritual needs (160). Lyons writes that characters who lack nourishment emotionally and spiritually also seem to lack nourishment by food

(151). This is the case with *Yonnondio* wherein the characters' physical condition mirrors their lack of identity, and also in "I Stand Here Ironing" because of Emily's inability to eat due to her inner suffering. The physical, emotional and spiritual are all inexorably connected for Olsen, but the connection was not recognized by the Communist Party.

Olsen's concern with the individual's spirituality directly confronts Communist ideals. Communism was to be the people's religion and their strength. Society was to reach a utopia together. However, Olsen's characters most often experience an inner growth. Frye writes that Olsen's characters actually emphasize the separateness of all people. She explains, "though that selfhood is always limited by the forces of external constraints, it is nonetheless defined and activated by the recognition . . . and the acceptance of responsibility for one's own actions and capacities" (133). Selfhood and spirituality become equivalent as characters recognize their female gender as a worthy part of their identity, and take action in controlling their lives, and understanding themselves. Eva in "Tell Me a Riddle" has lost touch with her identity because of her role in the family, yet in the end, her very decision to die naturally instead of in the hospital puts her in touch with her spirit; thus she dies victoriously.

A "Feminist Spiritual Vision"

In many of her works, Olsen criticizes traditional male-dominated religion and offers women empowerment as they find spirituality through concrete and personal experience. Elaine Neal Orr writes that Olsen's ancestry was Jewish, and after moving to

America, her parents "chose what they would keep of a Jewish identity, and it was largely the humanism of a Yiddishkeit" (Orr 24). Olsen never outwardly discusses her spirituality, but as Orr asserts, Olsen's writing has implications for religious understanding. Orr writes that Olsen shares a "feminist spiritual vision" by "bringing to light the essential values and ethics of women's care taking as well as the hindrances, encumbrances, and silences of mothering [and this] gives voice to a religious consciousness arising out of women's historical experience" (182). Olsen's characters reject organized religion and instead find spirituality in a personal way as they realize their individual capabilities. For example, Eva in "Tell Me a Riddle" has rejected institutionalized religion: "Religion that stifled and said: in Paradise, woman, you will be the footstool of your husband, and in life— poor chosen Jew— ground under, despised, trembling in cellars. And cremated" (*Tell Me a Riddle* 81). Eva's rejection of "religion" does not mean that Olsen believes divinity is nonexistent, since she does remember an "older power"she possessed before becoming completely consumed with the care of others (84). Instead, throughout the story, Eva takes a journey inward, "through memory and hearing of her truest self"(Orr 109). In finding her "truest self," she finds her "spiritual self," or the knowledge that her spiritual potential is endless, regardless of the dilapidation of her body.

Orr also asserts that "Olsen's writing communicates a vision of the enduring and divine attributes of the human being" (8). She discusses Feminist Theologian Nelle Morton's investigation into the word "spiritual." Morton found that in early understanding of life and spirit, "'the body is not separated from spirit, nor spirit separated

from woman, nor history separated from nature'" (qtd. in Orr 9). Instead, the spiritual and the physical are entirely connected. Furthermore, much akin to Ralph Waldo Emerson's views, each human possesses divinity waiting to awaken through self discovery. Emerson writes:

> How wild and mysterious our position as individuals to the Universe; here is always a certain amount of truth lodged as intrinsic foundation in the depths of the soul, a certain perception of absolute being, as justice, love, and the like, natures which must be the God of God, and this is our capital stock, this is our centripetal force. (14)

Emerson writes that although we have a God, we also have the ability to become divine ourselves; after all, we are ruled by the very same truths. Olsen approaches this same realization as her characters find their worth. Olsen "gives witness, though miraculously, and perhaps scandalously, that human and divine are knit in being and destiny" (Orr 12). Thus, every character " is a potential text for understanding the depths of human longing and [divine] possibility" (Orr 182). When Olsen's characters realize their potentials, and awaken to their worth and identities, they become spiritually alive.

For Olsen, individual, spiritual strength is necessary to achieve happiness or peace; this idea is very similar to Christian Feminist Carol Lakey Hess's observations. Hess defines "spirituality" as a call from a greater power to the human spirit. "It is a call to become a self, a call to celebrate that selfhood" (48). Hess mentions Soren Kierkegaard's *The Sickness Unto Death,* a work which insists that human despair comes because most

people do not discover their spiritual self. Kierkegaard saw three ways in which humans neglect to find their true selves: "(1) 'spiritlessness', the failure to realize one's possibility; (2) 'weakness,' the move to escape from one's self; and (3) 'defiance,' the attempt to affirm and master oneself by denying dependence upon [a higher power]" (39). Most of Olsen's characters are "spiritless" because they have forgotten that they have potential. They are too often consumed with economic or familial demands to realize that the fostering of the self is important. These external demands also impede characters from realizing that they are dependent upon a higher power. Olsen draws characters back to their spirits through the use of music in her writing. As the characters listen, they learn more about themselves in relation to others, and also in relation to an unknown, greater power. Many characters begin to feel potentiality and hope. Olsen captures the way in which music empowers the spirit, which counters the political purpose for which Communists wished to use music.

Chapter Three: Music in *Yonnondio* — The Beginnings of Change

Olsen's concern with the liberation of the individual spirit is seen as early as *Yonnondio*, a novel written in the 1930s but not published until 1974. Olsen's use of music in *Yonnondio* certainly does not conform to CPUSA's expectations. In *Yonnondio*, music serves the individual, not the community. Olsen experiments with emotional failures and triumphs through music as characters use music both positively and negatively. Throughout the novel music appears at pivotal times, as an inherent part of human nature. The music is intricately linked to the emotions and feelings of the characters, often fostering individual growth, and thus thwarting Communist doctrine intent upon minimizing the importance of emotions and individuality.

Yonnondio chronicles the experiences of the Holbrooks, a family of the Depression. Olsen details the hardships as parents Jim and Anna attempt to support their children with little or no financial means. The Holbrooks move from a mining camp in Wyoming, to a tenant farm in South Dakota, to the city of Omaha, but they never find financial comfort and security. Olsen explores the way financial hardships affect the happiness, confidence and health of the family, but especially how it affects the mother Anna and the oldest daughter Mazie.

Regardless of the Communists' desire to use music only to unite people for social change, Olsen shows through her writing that music can have great power, even in determining the destiny of a soul. Music's influence first surfaces in *Yonnondio* as Sheen

McEvoy creates a meaning from music that leads to destruction. As Sheen attempts to throw young Mazie in a mineshaft, "Angels were singing in his head, men were singing—glad praise, saved men" (12). Insane from the many deaths at the mine camp, Sheen imagines that the sacrifice of Mazie will save the rest of the men. Music is such a natural part of human reaction and creation, that McEvoy uses it for support in his desperate, insane attempt to change the fate of himself and the men he works with. His personal experience, of injury and terror in the mineshaft, persuades him to believe that the angels and men are praising him for his efforts to kill the little girl. Oblivious to all but the songs in his head, he allows them to control his fate: "One instant angels singing, men marching and singing," the next instant falling to his own death in the mine (14). In a blatant parody of Marxist ideology, Olsen shows that McEvoy's desire to save the workers beguiled him. McEvoy assumes he will become a hero to his co-workers if he makes a sacrifice to the mine, but instead the night watchman shoots him and he meets the fate he intended for Mazie. If McEvoy would have only interpreted the song in his mind differently, he would never have attempted to throw Mazie down the shaft, and would never have met with his own ill fate.

With this scene, Olsen presents an idea that permeates the rest of the novel: songs are an important part of human struggle, and the creation and interpretation of songs can determine destiny. Olsen's sensitivities as a woman aid in the depiction of what music can do for people. The right songs can liberate characters emotionally and spiritually, but the wrong songs can destroy the spirit. McEvoy created the song at a pivotal moment, and

because the music encouraged wrongdoing, his fate to die in the mine was decided. This event also becomes pivotal because it pushes the Holbrooks to move on, to escape the dismal and perilous life in the coal mines.

Instead of using music to obtain entitled rights for her characters, as Communists would do, Olsen uses music to bind and heal loving relationships. The Holbrook family uses music to share love and happiness as they approach a new life of farming in South Dakota. This expression of love through song removes all political agenda from music; the plan is a fight to embolden the spiritual self. For years financial circumstances have deprived the parents from sharing love with their children. Anna and Jim cannot express love to each other or their children because of the constant struggle to merely keep them fed and alive. The beginning pages of the novel make this clear: "For several weeks Jim Holbrook had been in an evil mood. The whole household walked in terror. He had nothing but heavy blows for the children, and he struck Anna too often to remember. . . Anna too became bitter and brutal" (6). Thus, music becomes a form of emotional survival, and this unification in song remains one of the only ways the family members express love for each other in the novel. On the last morning of the family's journey to their new farm, Jim and Anna begin singing. The words to one of the songs emphasize the fleeting moments when this family can share or feel love: "Roses love nightwinds, violets love dew, angels in heaven, know I love you" (27). Nightwinds and dew are a natural part of the course of a day, yet they occur at rare moments and one must be perceptive to take the time to notice them. Similarly, the love in the Holbrook family is smothered by turmoil

and so they must be in touch with their spiritual perceptions, as the song suggests, "angels in heaven," to feel the love for others.

As the Holbrooks sing "Down in the Valley," the wagon reaches their new home. Their past suffering in the mining town dissipates and the family joins together in the happiness of song: "Voices, rising and twining, beauty curving on rainbows of quiet sound, filled their hearts heavy" (27). The joining of these voices is significant because up until now the family has only faced turmoil. Understandably, this scene brings indescribable happiness as the characters experience elation for the future. The music does unite the family; however, the unification of the family has nothing to do with politics. The Communist Party was not interested in the unification of the bourgeois nuclear family; they were concerned with a unification of the "family" of class. The Holbrooks experience a unification of relationships: a loving connection, not a logical connection. The family becomes united in an emotion of contentment as they express joy through music. They all feel the promise for a better life, and feel an intimacy with each other.

Olsen also uses the music to emphasize the individuality of each character, thus creating heteroglossia. Yes, the family is united, but each character has his or her own unique experience with the music, and Olsen gives voice to this diversity. Mazie's experience is filled with emotion. The singing brings happy tears to her eyes (27). Mazie cries for joy as she experiences a moment when her parents are at peace and in love. Instead of hearing the voices of her parents clashing and contradicting, their voices are

"slow curving rhythms, slow curving sounds" (27). The singing affects Anna differently; it brings emotion linked with spirituality. The singing "plunges" a memory into her mind of her grandmother in religious ceremony. Even infant Ben is affected differently as he "stretched his arms and crowed" (26). As seen in the text, each individual relates to the music according to his or her past experience. Mazie has only known life with her parents. Anna recalls past hope and spiritual worth through a memory of her grandmother, and Ben, who is still an infant, most concerned with physical things, reacts in a bodily manner. Olsen has clearly demonstrated the use of music in uniting a group, but also touching the individual spirit.

In addition to recognizing the music's multiple effects, Olsen emphasizes its equivocal power. After the Holbrooks move to the city, they visit some old friends. This scene with music again occurs at a critical moment for the Holbrooks; after trying to support his family through other methods, Jim must move his family to the city and work digging sewer tunnels and then in a packinghouse. Suffering through the Depression, the children are sick, without necessities. They can only dream of luxuries. The family goes to visit their old friends, the Bedners, and the visit is "strained" because of economic differences (51). The Bedners have a five-room home with a piano, and "it didn't smell around there" (51). It is a mansion compared to the Holbrooks' old, rented house with dirt-caked walls and the smell of the packinghouse, or the river and the dump, depending on the direction of the wind. Park-Fuller writes that in this scene the family experiences a unified "sweet-sadness" from the music (8), but she fails to emphasize the origin of these

two contradictory feelings. The oppression occurs because music is misused to cloak the unfair differences in social classes. Still, a fleeting moment of peace comes to the Holbrooks as they escape with song.

First the Bedners invite Anna to play the piano, which she quickly refuses, saying, "I haven't touched the piano since I don't know when . . .You play Else" (52). Anna's refusal to make music reflects her feelings of unworthiness and her inability to create because of her lack of identity. Else states that Anna "used to play real good by ear" (52), but at this point in life Anna can not hear music to play. Her emotions have been deadened as she is forced to live in a house and city she hates. When Jim brought her to the new house, Anna had to turn off her senses. She tried "not to see or smell" the rubbish dumped near the house and the dilapidated state that the house was in (49). Even though her deep depression does not surface until later, moving to the city brought Anna to the point where her soul and emotions were being destroyed. While looking at the house, Anna held her daughter "Bess against the corrosive eating into her heart" (49). Social conditions rob Anna of her dreams and self-worth, and silence any capability of making music. Anna's gesture of refusing to make music foreshadows the eventual force the music will bring.

Instead of using music to buoy their spirits in this scene, characters use it to hide behind, denying the awkward emotions present. The hostess plays the piano, the host sings, and music conceals vast differences between the friends. Jim and Anna sing lyrics from "old times of happiness," and the music brings a perplexing balm: "They sang and

sang, and a longing, a want undefined, for something lost, for something never known troubled them all" (53). The scene brings serenity, yet is also ambiguous. The music almost erases the barriers of class, but can not, and any intimacy once held between the characters of different classes is now lost. As will be seen with Carol in "O Yes," the different backgrounds and situations of the characters makes the possibility of true unification through song impossible. Unlike the Holbrooks, the Bedners' interpretation of the music brings only joyful entertainment— their social situation requires no artificial escape. After the singing Else speaks with the "same chirp, the dearie and honey" and Alex laughs "too loud" (53). They are ignorant and careless of "Jim trying too hard to laugh, and Anna sitting shrunken and ill" (53). For Jim and Anna, the music stimulated memories of past happiness which calmed them momentarily. After the music, the Holbrooks are back to feeling unworthy and awkward, the music useless to their souls, only used to hide the embarrassment of two separate classes. The "want undefined" is for a classless society, but none of the individuals will acknowledge this, and so the music becomes ineffective.

The music, then, from a Communist standpoint, would be seen as an opiate, as the characters attempt to ignore their situation through immersing themselves in song. But in fact the music does liven the characters' sensations, and inspires a moment of self worth for young Jimmie. As the people sing, "the sweet intoxicating smell of spring floated in; the lamplight made soft lakes of light, shadows bending over, gentle" (53). Characters are aware of the beauty around them, and for Jimmie the feeling empowers his spirit: "a fifth

voice, pure, ethereal, veiled over the rest" (53). His sweet spirit made the others long to hear him again and again, and so he sang, barely able to pronounce the words, but able to feel and impart spirituality. For him the music is curative to his spiritual self, as he finds strength to sing despite the awful conditions he and his family face. Olsen uses a polyphony of voices (the Bedners', Anna's, Jim's, and Jimmie's) to show that one experience can create a different outcome for each individual.

As *Yonnondio* continues, Jim seeks moral strength from music, and Anna seeks spiritual strength. The need to buoy emotions and the spirit through music does not conform with Communist materialism. Jim attempts to use the curative force of music in repentance to his family. Certainly the family needs some form of help. Circumstances of the Depression prevent Jim from earning enough money, and the Holbrook's oldest son has joined the "street scum" in an effort to anesthetize himself from the stress of home. Most disturbing, Anna suffers from a severe depression that leaves her "remote," neglecting duties as a mother and wife (56-58). Jim's degrading work in the ice cold sewer for very little pay leads him to treat his family with cruelty and abuse. Feeling the weight of responsibility that comes with being the breadwinner, Jim suffers extreme guilt for what his family must experience, although society is truly to blame. In the midst of all these troubles, Jim asks young Jimmie to sing "for i'm a poor cowboy and I Know I Done Wrong" (58). As mentioned earlier, the Holbrooks rarely show love to one another, yet this is another instance in which music helps characters to express themselves. Although the song seems whimsical, by asking his young son to sing, Jim acknowledges that he has

done "wrong" in not providing for his family and in being extremely abusive. The capitalization of the words in the text reflects this. Nothing is capitalized until the words, "I Know I Done Wrong," emphasizing Jim's feelings of remorse and worthlessness. The song becomes a curative force in allowing a means for communication. Like Anna at the Bedner's, Jim can not create the music himself, but he knows what a relief the music can bring and so urges Jimmie to sing instead. The song is of the mass-produced, popular culture; nevertheless, Olsen uses it to give strength to these characters as it provides a means to communicate apologetic feelings.

Anna attempts to use music for spiritual and psychological strength, after she has almost literally died from depression. Anna's use of music and Mazie's listening are more powerful than Jim's listening and Jimmie's singing. Olsen implies that the female's emotionality can more easily create music, and thus more easily become empowered by it. At this point in the novel, Anna has suffered serious mental and physical illness, but is beginning to improve. She takes her children to gather dandelion greens to eat for supper. Sitting on the grassy hill of dandelions, arm in arm with her daughter, she sings "O Shenandoah." Linda Park-Fuller asserts that Anna's use of music in the scene binds the characters to a "broader human society" (9); however, the words of the scene connote more of an individual transcendence, much like Michael Staub refers to in his article, "The Struggle for 'Selfness' Through Speech in Olsen's *Yonnondio: From the Thirties.*" Staub asserts that singing, along with speech and other sounds, are tools used by the women characters in *Yonnondio* in their struggle for "selfness." He notes that for Anna and

Mazie, singing "is a mechanism for coping with sorrows and unfulfilled dreams" (136). Staub states that "Anna is constantly pressed-down economically, socially, and psychologically. Yet she always presses back through singing, loving her children, and affirming what she believes is right" (137). He adds that "singing is her method for reaffirming her human spirit and her children's right to a life better than the one she had been born into" (137). Despite these observations, Staub's analysis only partially covers the use of music in *Yonnondio*. He fails to mention the three scenes discussed earlier, and believes that Mazie's eventual insanity and ill-fate is obvious. He writes that "Mazie is a bright girl, but one who never will get the chance to break the double bonds of being poor and female" (132). Staub later concludes that, "whether or not [Mazie will] emerge from her dreams and visions to live a saner life is left unanswered. It is implicit, however, that she will not" (134). However, this very scene on the grassy hill promises a hopeful future for Mazie.

Characters use music in this scene on the hill at the edge of the city to strengthen their identities. Again, as with the earlier experience at the Bedners', music awakens the senses: "River sand shimmered and burnished the bright grasses . . . . Young catalpa leaves overhead quivered and glistened" (101). For a moment, Anna transcends her dismal existence: "Mazie felt the strange happiness in her mother's body . . . happiness and farness and selfness" (101). The fact that Anna musters up the hope within herself to create music shows that she is getting stronger. Mazie is "cocooned . . . Soft wove the bliss round hurt and fear and want and shame . . . healing, transforming" (101). This

effect may seem a destructive cover, because it sounds like just a momentary hideaway, similar to the scene at the Bedners', unless these words are closely considered. A cocoon allows for miraculous transformation, from that of a caterpillar to a butterfly. Music renews Anna and Mazie, but also teaches Mazie. She now knows she possesses the power to improve herself and her situation, and this knowledge begins her transformation. While her social status limits her, she still may become free and beautiful as a butterfly—she does have a chance to learn and grow throughout life. Mazie becomes aware of the power for good within music.

This experience with her mother develops Mazie's sensitivities and she begins to take action to help her loved ones. In predicting an ill fate for Mazie, Staub overlooks a scene wherein Mazie uses music to rescue her brother. Mazie can sense danger when young Ben sings terrifying words to their infant brother, words that are destructive to the spirit:

> Skinny, skinny run for your life,
> Here comes fatty with a butcher knife.
> Ladybug, ladybug, fly away home,
> Your house is on fire, your children all gone. . .
>
> Ol' clothes to sell, ol' clothes to sell. . .
> Mother, Mother I am sick.
> Call the doctor quick, quick quick.

Doctor, Doctor, will I die?

Yes. You will. And so shall I. (109-110)

The songs describe these children's current life situations. They are starving, they do not have sufficient clothing, and they are in danger of dying. Ben sings without hope; his spirit has given up, and Mazie senses the danger in these lyrics. She "*listens*, shudders and gathers them both to her, saying firmly: We're going to sing 'Hoopde Dooden Do Barney Google with the Googlygoogly Eyes, I'm Dreamin Now of Hally" (110). Olsen puts the word "listens" in italics, emphasizing the fact that Mazie is truly hearing with her heart and spiritual self. Offering an alternative song, Mazie tries to save her brothers from despair; for she knows that good music can preserve life. Her song may contain nonsensical words, but they are better than the bleak words her brother sings, and the dream in the song may strengthen the spirit. Mazie begins to change. She knows that the spirit must be nourished by feelings of hope and potential, and she shares this knowledge with her brother. This becomes the last detailed experience concerning music.

However, even in the final pages, Olsen shows the power of music to improve life through the strengthening of emotions and the spirit. Anna sings, "I Saw a Ship a-Sailing" to keep herself cheerful through her tedious housework. And, in the very last paragraphs of the novel, Will comes home with a radio, or "crystal set" (132). Olsen uses the radio and mass-produced song positively, against Communist Party doctrine, which taught that mass-produced culture oppressed the classes. The sounds coming from the radio allow Mazie to "float" on her pain, and she hears the singing, described as "*human and stellar*"

(132). The music teaches the listeners of their humanity but also of their spirituality. The radio brings a magical, hopeful feeling into the home as ears tune to sounds representing other unoppressive dimensions of life. The Holbrooks can listen and feel emotions of hope and happiness through this little electrical device. Anna's last words to Jim emphasize this feeling of hope: "Come in, get freshened up. Here, I'll help you. The air's changin, Jim . . . I see for it to end tomorrow, at least get tolerable" (132). She refers to the unbearable hot weather, but the words mean much more. She sees an end of their suffering, and her spirit will not give up. They will all be bolstered through the strength of music.

These last occurrences of music illustrate the potentiality of the characters. Mazie has stopped a spiritually destructive moment for herself and her brothers, Anna continues to build her strength and hope for better days through song, and the whole family partakes in the wonders of the radio bringing hope and joy into their home. Olsen thus shows the many ways emotions and spirit can be touched through song. Music is an inherent part of human life only because it is an inherent part of the spirit. It is a means for people to damage themselves, but thankfully it is also a means that brings the soul strength and love. Because of the Communists' analytical, materialist view of the world, however, they undoubtedly would have deemed Olsen's use of music in *Yonnondio* as irrelevant to their cause; they would have labeled Olsen a "counter-revolutionary."

Chapter Four: Music, "O Yes," and the Continued Rebellion

Olsen's defiance against Communist expectations continues in "O Yes," a story she wrote in 1956, long after she left the Party in 1949. The story again focuses on political issues, in this case, race. "O Yes" relates the story of two young friends, Carol, a white girl, and Parialee, an African American girl. The girls are neighbors and best friends until they reach junior high, where different social expectations pull them apart. Society forces them to assume the roles of the oppressed and the oppressor, and Carol's pain is depicted as she is introduced to racial differences which she can not understand. Scholars generally focus on the second half of the story, which details the pressures from school for these two girls to separate because of racism. However, the very first scene in the African American Community's church foreshadows the division as Carol is exposed to the emotions and songs of the congregation.

The beginning scene in church depicts an African American community joining together in song, supposedly to give them strength. However, the service becomes enslaving, not liberating. Constance Coiner correctly points out that the preacher and the choir and congregation are participating in an assertion/affirmation dialogue which "imposes unity and control by locking participants into predetermined, traditional roles" (*Better Red* 182). However, she does not make any connection with Olsen's political motivation in depicting the congregation this way. Neither does Coiner explore the effect the music has on Carol's emotions and soul. In "O Yes" Olsen shows a destructive way in

which music can be used, and also shows that music can not always unite people. People of certain circumstance, whether it be an oppressed race like the African Americans in this story, or an oppressed socioeconomic class like those in the Communist movement, can not always succeed in joining others to their cause solely through the means of music.

In "O Yes" Olsen shows that music of the community does not always result in liberation; in fact community music can be used much as an opiate, just as the Communist Party claimed religion was used for. Using an African American congregation to demonstrate the oppressive power in music would be antithetical to Communist Party doctrine because many of the songs in the *Worker's Songbook* and other songs used in their political movement were taken from African American spirituals (Liebermann 39). Communists saw the power in African American music as a means to further their own cause for social revolution. In "O Yes" Olsen captures the unifying hope music offers, but the characters do not act on this hope. Instead the people are stuck, unified in passivity. In comparison with *Yonnondio*, the music is not as blatantly destructive as the scene when Mazie's brothers sing of death and starvation, for in church they sing of God and salvation. However, the congregation surrenders to what they see as an unchangeable fate, just as the Holbrook boys began to do, until Mazie interrupted them. The people in the church all experience the same degradation and oppression associated with their race, and for them unifying in a song of hope is a natural way of survival: "*When our cares are past/ when we're home at last. . .*And that burden you been carrying—ohhhh that burden—not for always will it be. No, not for always" (44-45). They sing of future

happiness; sadly, though, according to the song, their cares and burdens will continue, and happiness will not come until after death, when they reach their true home. Nowhere do words of joy come for the current life situation, just as no words appear to encourage the changing of society. They sing about a "*Great Day*," which gives the congregation a psychological boost. Tragically, this only occurs for one hour a week while in church meeting, and dreams of a "*Great Day*" without individual action can not bring change. Thus, Olsen demonstrates the restrictive power of music.

The members of the congregation accept adversity but never question their power to fight back and to make their lives better while on earth. They sing, "*God's going to trouble the waters*" which becomes the way they can endure suffering (47). By assuring each other that God will send trials to test their faith, they become willing to accept the shackles placed upon them by society. In fact, some of the final words of singing epitomize subjection: "*They taken my blessed Jesus and flogged him to/ the woods/ And they made him hew out his cross and they dragged him to Calvary/ . . . he never cried a word* " (46). The congregation uses Christ's story as the paradigm for their own lives. They will merely endure being flogged or subjugated, never crying a word, until their lives are over and they reach resurrection. The worshipers forget the belief that Christ was a god who had agency and *chose* to suffer for mankind. They do not need to suffer for mankind, but lock themselves into this fate because of their interpretation of the song. They again sing of Christ, "*he never cried a word*," and through this repetition engrave within themselves the idea that they, like Christ must not use their voices to object to

mistreatment. For the congregation persecution is real, but they submit too easily to their fate. Because the people are trained for oppression, escaping becomes difficult. They etch this oppressive interpretation of the music upon their hearts.

In this story, Olsen has poignantly captured a way in which oppressed people channel their emotions through music to bring them solace, and in their minds, to liberate themselves. Unfortunately, in "O Yes" this liberation is only momentary and the actual, material lives of the African American characters in the story do not change. This is similar to the characters in *Yonnondio*; however, the Holbrooks, namely Anna and Mazie, take upon their souls an *individual* transformation, which may lead to change. Change is possible only when one feels enough self worth to make it. Anna and Mazie feel enough self worth to know they can improve in social status and demand rights for themselves as women. The congregation in "O Yes," in contrast, stays united in subjugation, and no one feels enough self worth to create changes in society. As Coiner states, the singing of the congregation "imposes unity and control" (*Better Red* 182). Parry's mother Alva still must work nights at an unrewarding and exhausting job. Parry, too, obeying the teachings of the music, allows herself to be "sorted" in school. She stops doing homework, "for where is the space or time and what is the sense?" (57), and when schoolmates and teachers degrade her, she does not argue; she succumbs. Sadly, she also surrenders the close friendship she had with Carol. The African American characters in the story may sing united for hope, but their passive actions prevent them from achieving progress. Their individual souls are not liberated, so they will not be liberated in society. Olsen

contradicts Communist doctrine by emphasizing that liberation must happen within the individual before any change can be made in society.

Olsen also uses Carol to show that some attempts to unify groups through music, as Communists would do, can not be successful. During this church meeting, protagonist Carol experiences the opposite of the liberating force that Mazie of *Yonnondio* felt when her mother sang upon the grassy hill. Carol and her mother are the only white people attending the baptism of Carol's friend, Parry. Initially, the music in the church seems to Carol as "one glad rhythm" with which she sings and claps along (41). Carol attempts to "untwine the intertwined voices, to search how the many rhythms rock apart and yet are one glad rhythm" (41), but she can not find the individuals in the polyphony of song. Caught in "exultant spirals of sound" (44), Carol tries to join with the chanting "Great Day," although the passionate atmosphere leaves her with a sense of discomfort. She may be singing with the group, but she can not identify with the feelings the song brings to the congregation. And, as Carol hears the screaming of a woman in the audience, and sees that no one else is startled, she begins to feel alienated from the group (45). She has not been persecuted in life and the oppressiveness of the music terrifies her. She does not understand that the African American congregation unites because of past persecution and subconsciously succumbs to present day persecution.

Carol's interpretation of the music is not blind acceptance, like the others in the church. For her the "music leaps and prowls" (47); it appears to be a fierce predator trying to enslave Carol. She does not find consolation in the words of the songs, but sees

the effect this music has on the congregation. Intense fear soon overpowers Carol's efforts to sing along; escalating, the gospel singing becomes increasingly animated. Women scream, thrashing begins, and the clapping sound is tremendous, with the piano "whipping" in the background. The use of the word "whipping" creates a haunting image: the congregation's ancestors were whipped as slaves. The music attempts to enslave Carol as well, but she fights because she is unaccustomed to such oppression. Carol's detachment from the group's interpretation leaves her rejecting the music. A reluctant learner, she protects herself from understanding the pain that causes these people to unite together so intensely. She does not want to hear the music, and tries to occupy her mind with other thoughts: "On Carol's fan, a little Jesus walked on wondrously blue waters to where bearded disciples spread nets out of a fishing boat. If she studied the fan— became it— it might make a wall around her" (47). She wants to make the music into something she could play on a record player so that she could quiet the volume (47). Building a psychological wall and ignoring the sound, she hopes to hide from the effect the music brings to the congregation. In her mind she "does not need to listen" (42).

Here again Olsen refuses to accept a logical, materialist viewpoint and instead presents a reality full of contradictions, because although the music's effect on the African American congregation is negative, it invites Carol to gain an understanding of the differences between races. However, Carol's limited background restricts her from grasping the feelings held by the church members. The choir and congregation, swaying with the sound, frighten Carol: "No, do not look," she tells herself, before being

"drowned under the sluice of the slow singing and sway," and fainting (48). While in this unconscious state induced by the music, she has a vision: "Here now Hostess Foods where Alva Phillips works her nights— . . . it is all sunken under water" (48). Carol swims, following Parialee's mother Alva through the mundane steps of her job oiling the machines before she wakens back to consciousness. Through this vision she begins to see that Alva is drowned, or trapped, in her existence. She sees Alva's only control is over the machinery she must care for in her occupation. The underwater vision helps Carol see a difference between herself and Parry's people, but she lacks the knowledge and experience to fully understand. As scholar Elaine Orr writes, "the church service that genuinely expresses the black community's hope alienates the white girl" (Orr 97).

Carol's experience reflects that of any outsider who may listen to music from a political or social movement. In fact, in this story Olsen illustrates one reason why the music of the Communist movement did not always motivate individuals and groups to act. R. Serge Denisoff explains that those "uncommitted" to the Communist movement could not understand the music's message (103). The bourgeois were ignorant of the working people's problems and feelings. As a result, Denisoff writes, they were often offended or amused by Communist music (103). Carol's innocence is much like what Denisoff describes as the middle class's "lack of folk consciousness" (103). With no experience or understanding of oppression, she is left confused and frightened. Thus, the music of the African American congregation can not offer unification of races, not even with the whites who sympathetically attend the ceremony.

When Carol leaves the church, Alva tries to help her understand the emotions of the music. However, the congregation's experience of faith and Carol's experience of fear were so different that Carol can not understand their song. When Alva explains to Carol what music means to the congregation, she tells her, "Not everybody feels religion the same way. Some it's in their mouth, but some it's like a hope in their blood, their bones. And they singing songs every word that's real to them, Carol, every word out of they own life. And the preaching finding lodgement in their hearts" (51). The words that are "real" to the congregation are words of subjugation; the "blood and bones" of the congregation understand oppression because of their present situation and their slave ancestry.

Carol questions her terrifying experience at the end of the story when her mother switches the radio on to a gospel song. Again, against Communist doctrine, Olsen uses radio and mass-produced song for a positive result. The music touches Carol and forces her to seek understanding. Carol runs down the stairs frightened, pulling the knob off the radio in her panic to silence the sound. She asks, "Mother, why did they sing and scream like that?. . . I hear it all the time" (60). Carol still hears the song of the congregation in her mind and heart; the music will not leave her. Too frightful to let the powerful feelings dwell in her heart, only now does Carol start to question, "What was it, Mother? Why?" (60). Her mother wonders, "*Aren't you now, haven't you had feelings in yourself so strong they had to come out some way?*" (60). Her mother knows that the powers in the music are "*a characteristic of the religion of all oppressed peoples. . . even [her] own great grandparents*" (60). However, Carol cannot empathize with the sorrowful emotions

of oppressed people, and she no longer understands her friend Parry because of her different racial and cultural past. Her mother cannot explain to Carol why the music had the effects it did upon the congregation; she knows that it is impossible to explain the history and the everyday life that must be lived by these people. Carol has been baptized into the awareness of racial differences through the emotion of music, but is left distant from the black congregation. Thus, Olsen demonstrates that at times, music can fail to unite people. However, the music inspired Carol to desire empathy for the oppressed. As she gains empathy for the struggles of others, her spiritual self will be strengthened.

Chapter Five: Liberating Eva's Soul With Music

"Tell Me a Riddle" (1960) emphasizes the main character Eva's oppressed sex and class. Certain themes in the story challenge Communist materialism, because as Eva's body begins to deteriorate physically, her spiritual identity becomes stronger. Through Eva's use of music, Olsen clearly magnifies the importance and potential of the spirit. Eva has worked hard at raising her family in poverty and caring for her husband, David, who has been thoughtless and oppressive to her throughout their marriage. Eva is dying of cancer, and David makes her travel from place to place, to allow her one last visit with the children. This is all against Eva's will, for she wishes to stay home. The couple ends their journey in San Francisco, where they stay with their granddaughter, who nurses Eva until she dies. Even though critics have not analyzed the occurrences and use of music in "Tell Me a Riddle," the music clearly becomes a force in strengthening Eva's spirit. Elaine Orr writes, "it is . . . holy to nurture oneself and to ask for encouragement from others that one may experience one's own fulfillment" (182). Eva uses music as a means of self-discovery as she listens intensely to obtain her own unique interpretation. Orr insists, "Eva's spiritual quest is a journey inward, through memory and hearing of her truest self" (109). Eva grows spiritually as the music encourages her to explore her identity through past experience.

Eva uses music as a curative force, and, like Anna in *Yonnondio,* she attempts to find "selfness" and enlightenment through music. As in "O Yes," a terrifying instance

occurs when Eva is forced to attend a community sing where Socialist revolutionary songs of the past are sung. Unlike Carol, however, Eva is able to understand the music immediately. She realizes that all the singing for the liberation of the people was in vain—and that it is the liberation of the individual spiritual self that matters. The most notable difference between Eva and the other characters discussed thus far is that Eva is aware from the beginning of the story that something can be learned by listening to and understanding the emotions of music. Throughout the novella, Eva attempts to grasp the melodies and harmonies, and liberates her spiritual self, which has been repressed during her demanding role as wife and mother.

In her youth, Eva actively pursued Socialism as a Russian revolutionary (103). However, when she and her husband moved to the United States, her life changed: she became oppressed in a male-dominated, working-class society. Eva was constantly working for her husband and children, trying to make food from scraps and clothing from rags. She suffered through raising a family with very little money and through marriage to an insensitive man. A Russian immigrant, she struggled in America when she dreamt she would not. As her people were oppressed in czarist Russia, with only small bits of cultural hope to sustain them, so was she oppressed in her role as mother and wife, using any spare moment to try and renew herself through literature and music. Her only rest came at wee hours of the night when David was still out. She could read then, and also listen to music. She would sit close and listen to the "ordered sounds and the struggling" played by the phonograph (68). Her life was like this music. Ordered, constant sounds of children

quarreling, dishes clanking. While raising her family, Eva knew she needed nourishment, and listening to music brought individual worth as she could understand the intricate emotions involved. She never had the time to listen uninterrupted until now, when her children have left home, and she approaches death. Eva recognizes that answers for the complexity of human life can be found within music. For Eva music brings renewal and change— through psychological, emotional, and spiritual power, forms of power the CPUSA would not recognize as important.

Eva attempts to use the healing power of music to revitalize her body and also bring back the love she once felt for her husband. She is tormented because her doctor said he could find nothing wrong with her, yet she feels ill. She wonders, "I am not really sick, the doctor said it, then why do I feel so sick?" (74). Eva and David have been quarrelling constantly because he wishes to move to a retirement home and she does not. One evening, because she is frightened at her feelings of sickness, Eva begs David to stay at home with her for once instead of spending the evening among his friends. David finds this a perfect opportunity to emphasize the need to move to the retirement home. He threatens that if she does not move, she will be alone just as during "the time of solitary when she was a girl in exile in Siberia" (75). These words are extremely abusive when considering that during exile she had only a window the size of her eye to see outside from her dark cell (83). The exile was a dreadful, depressing time of her life, when she saw people killed, and she fought to save her mentality by reading (103); her husband cruelly uses the hideous experience for his argument. Eva sobs curses from her mother tongue to

him as he leaves home: "Grow, oh shall you grow like an onion, with your head in the ground. Like the hide of a drum shall you be, beaten in life, beaten in death" (75).

For the next week, Eva sleeps on a cot on the porch, and will not go near her husband, nor does "he try to make peace or care for her" (75). Finally, one night David awakens to find her singing, with all her energy, a "Russian love song of fifty years ago" (75). Eva attempts to find strength through this song. She needs physical strength because her body is dying and spiritual strength because she and her husband have been quarreling. In her struggle she sings a song from her youth, when she was a strong revolutionary, and also from a time when she and David were in love (115). She sings loudly, "shaking off the drops of rain, the lightening riving her lifted face" (75), and she feels strength. This individual action she takes to empower herself does indeed strengthen her spirit. She tells her husband as he carries her in, "I can breathe now, . . . my lungs are rich" (75); she feels invigorated, alive, and victorious.

Unfortunately, Eva does have cancer and it has already spread throughout her gall bladder and liver, and "everywhere" (77), so although Eva knows of a curative force in the music, no physical cure is possible. Communists would conclude that her singing had no power because it had no physical effect upon Eva, but Olsen shows that a spiritual, non-materialist effect has significance. Eva strengthens her spirit as she remembers feelings of love and independence from her past. In addition, the very fact that she realizes the power in music leads her to further human understanding.

The surge of vitality, stemming from her attempt to channel the force in song,

drives Eva to use music for spiritual strength. As Eva's illness increases, she attempts to listen deeply to interpret music. While she lies bedridden, an FM radio placed beside her brings in "shapes of music" (102). Eva concentrates so closely that the music makes "shapes" in her mind. She tries to visualize this audible medium, suggesting that more exists than just the material sound. Eva listens, "coiled, convoluted like an ear" (102). She coils her whole body as an ear for her soul, and listening intently she struggles to grasp the music which holds a secret, or answer to human life. She tries to soak in the emotions and harmonies; she is "intense in listening" (102). In delirium she will turn the radio off but still lie listening, concealing her tears, as the music in her mind continues. The music brings "the soft distant roaring of humanity" to Eva's mind (99), which Eva knows she has been a part of, but she realizes that this "roar" of humanity can only be created through individual experience. This is why in the end of her life she wants to realize her individuality and not interact with others. When her husband wants to move to the retirement home to be around friends, she tells him, "I do not need others to enjoy [myself]" (66). Eva, "*being able at last to live within, and not move to the rhythms of others*" (68), wishes to stay isolated in her home and finally enjoy some peace. She could now spend time in individual studying and pondering, finding truth for herself much like a mentor from her youth, who knew that "life was holy, knowledge was holy" (103). Olsen's use of the radio in this instance, as at the end of *Yonnondio*, defies the popular Communist view that music mass-produced and broadcasted on the radio only helped strengthen Capitalist power. As in the end of "O Yes," when Carol hears the gospel music

on the radio, it is clear that the use of radio music can be edifying for Eva. The listener decides what effect the music will have. But, while Carol turns to her mother to find understanding and is left confused, Eva turns inside herself to understand the music she hears and thus comes closer to freeing her spiritual self. Eva understands that the knowledge gained through life's hardships is holy.

Eva's personal experience of oppression allows for a true understanding of what it means to be human. "The music," says Eva, "still it is there and we do not hear; knocks, and our poor human ears too weak" (105). The emotion from music offers knowledge, solace and strength; in other words, insight into human struggle, yet most people become bogged down by the demands and teachings of society and forget about their link with humankind. The link is communal, but can only be made as people change individually first. Eva knows that people must "learn what humanizes" and that the only way to do so is to study "how [we have] come from our savage past, [and] how no longer to be savages" (81). Eva gains knowledge as she begins to analyze her past. For example, her granddaughter Jeannie reminds her of Lisa, a fellow revolutionary, and she remembers Lisa's wisdom, but also her mistakes.

Eva understands that the music has something valuable to offer, yet she knows that its abstract answers are nearly impossible for humans to grasp. The implication is that only gods are able to glean the answers offered by the ethereal notes of song, for "human ears [are] too weak"(105). Because of Eva's active listening and searching, she begins to understand a worth of her self that exists beyond the physical. She has been striving to

learn, even though at one time the music terrified her, just as it did Carol. Whereas Carol rejects the knowledge that the music offers, Eva begins to search deeper within the music to find answers.

Although Eva understands that music offers power, she has a frightening experience from listening to a choir of elderly people at a Community Sing. This music disturbs her as it penetrates the memories of her past. She, her husband, and an old friend attend the sing, and "*so it is that she sits in the wind of the singing, among the thousand various faces of age*" (96). For Eva, the music produces a "wind" instead of just notes. This is the second time music produced wind in Olsen's writing. In "O Yes" the "wind of the sudden singing" makes the curtain in the window of the church move. The force of the music is not just audible; it has power to stir the air and the spirit. The wind felt by Eva compels her to look upon the elderly faces of the choir and understand the diverse experiences each member must have had through life. As a result, Eva turns her hearing aid off at once, and wishes she could turn her sight off as well (96). She desires to block out the music, afraid of the strong emotions it might hold. Despite switching off the hearing aid, music reaches her: "*their singing came voicelessly soft and distant*"and the faces "*roared*" through the "*savage zest*" of the singing (96). Eva sees the choir as ferocious and savage. The group has not yet learned how "no longer to be savages" (81). They have power, but it has no aim. They do not study the past for understanding. "Unused the life in them" (99), Eva says.

The choir's unification in song stirs many overwhelming emotions within Eva but

she feels completely separate from the group. Their powerful singing brings Eva a roaring connection with the past. The choir pulls her back through all earlier music she has heard, some peaceful, some disturbing: "children-chants, mother-croons, singing of the chained love serenades, Beethoven storms, mad Lucia's scream drunken joy-songs, keens for the dead, work-singing" (98). The music has this power to reach her because of her experience from life and her understanding of past generations. She hears the diverse children chanting in their naive play, the mother's loving and careful croons, the romantic and hopeful serenades. She also knows of the revolutionary power in Beethoven's symphony and the intensity of opera; this recollection of classical music defies Communist expectations. Classical music was said to be a tool of the ruling class, and most leading activists of the CPUSA felt that only the intelligentsia could recognize the revolutionary power of Beethoven and other classical composers (Denisoff 16). According to Michael Gold, a leading supporter of "socialist realism," art "must be for 'lumberjacks, hoboes, clerks, sectionhands, machinists, harvesthands, waiters'" (qtd. in Denisoff 15). Classical music was supposedly under the control of capitalists, and therefore did not encourage revolution. However, Eva's experience suggests that classical music does indeed assist in the revolution of the individual. As an individual she has heard many types of music over her life, and adapts to those that feed her spirituality.

The impact of the choir causes Eva to remember the first time she heard music, when she was a "*sore-covered little girl*" who "*danced her ecstacy of grimace to flutes*" at a village wedding (97). The girl is young, innocent, and accepting. She allows music to

fill her soul and give her strength regardless of her pain. The little girl is happy. However, this image of the past disturbs Eva. Covered with sores, the little girl desperately forces herself to dance "*to flutes that scratched*" (97), the pain so strong that her mind makes her channel the music heard for survival; for being occupied with dancing may relieve her from pain. The memory distresses Eva so much that she only feels weight pushing and pressing upon her; this weight of the past becomes too powerful. Eva needs air and to escape from the community sing. The knowledge of human suffering and human joy the music offers is overwhelming.

In addition to the vast emotions from life that music awakens, Eva distrusts the community of singers that has jogged her memories. As a community, they are ignorant to the individuality of the audience and its own members. The choir seems "*savage*" because they sing joyfully while Eva and others in the world have gone through "*hunger; secret meetings; human rights; spies; betrayals; prison; escape*" (98). Much like the congregation in "O Yes," and the Holbrooks and Bedners in *Yonnondio*, the choir misuses music, singing but not understanding or acting on the emotion music can evoke. Eva says of the choir, "Singing. Unused the life in them" (99). She is upset that these people are idle at the end of life, not helping to relieve suffering, or working to gain knowledge, much like those in the retirement home where her husband wished her to move. Eva does not feel part of this idle community and instead realizes more fully her importance as an individual. She wants to know for herself the purpose of life (99). She does not see the members of the choir as independent, but instead sees them as ignorant followers.

Eva has come to see that liberation of the masses is nothing without first a liberation of the spiritual self. It is this knowledge that she carries when she passes on. If she keeps her promise to her granddaughter, Eva has let music fully enter her spirit at the end of her life. Although Eva was a little girl suffering physically, she was dancing to music. She was able to find happiness beyond the physical pain as her spirit gave her strength to dance. Now, as the pains of cancer overcome Eva's body, she can still find ecstasy from the magnificence of music. Accepting with the heart of an innocent child but the experience of a lifetime, she has come to understand what the music has to teach. Music awakens the divine potentiality inherent in every person. Regardless of Communist doctrine, Olsen demonstrates a power in music beyond the physical and even beyond the knowable— "our poor human ears too weak" (105). Her story never finally states what power the music has to offer, only that it is something of a spiritual understanding, something that relates to souls beyond human material existence. Olsen could never accept the Communist belief that all would be solved through social revolution; her emotions told her otherwise. Like Eva, Olsen is a revolutionary because she knows that "life [is] holy, knowledge [is] holy" and that all life experiences must be related to the spiritual (103).

Conclusion

Tillie Olsen sacrificed much to the Communist Party. She was a dedicated activist, even to the point of going to prison for the Party's cause. However, Olsen was more dedicated to her voice as a woman, and as an individual. When the Party drowned out human emotions, Olsen rebelled by magnifying them in her writing. She also rebelled against the materialist, analytical ways of the Communist Party by emphasizing the spiritual and emotional. Olsen, by her use of music, especially rebels against Communist ideals. Olsen gives the music in her writing to have an equivocal power: sometimes music has the potential to help characters but sometimes to hurt them. Most important, the music liberates the individuality of characters. To reword the slogan in the *Worker's Songbook* (1934), a book of songs approved for the Communist Party, for Tillie Olsen:

> Music Penetrates Everywhere
>
> It Carries *Emotions* [rather than "Words"] With It
>
> It Fixes Them In the Mind
>
> It Graves Them In the Heart
>
> Music is a weapon in the *Struggle of the Spirit* [rather than "Class Struggle"]
>
> (Lieberman 28, italics mine)

The characters in her writing do not use music to improve society, but instead use it to improve the individual soul, and in this way Olsen goes beyond the Communist Party ethos that valued group political action and the engagement of the intellect rather than

"bourgeois individualist feelings." In doing so, Olsen became a true counterrevolutionary.

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